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THERE'S A STRANGER IN TOWN: POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF JESUS BY CHRISTIANS

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CHAPTER I

AN EXPLORATION OF THE PROBLEM

Is Jesus merely a decoration in the organized religion which we know as Christianity?

It might sound like a strange question, but could it be that many Christians have a poor or at best, confused perception of Jesus, who He is and was, and what He stands for? Could it be that many Christians, more than might be imagined, struggle daily with whether or not they believe in Jesus as divine as well as human, and whether or not they like or even respect what He supposedly represents and demands of His followers?

These are disturbing questions, as the most logical supposition any person might make is that a Christian upholds Jesus as Savior, since that was, according to the Gospels, His specific task. But while many Christians believe in His human, historical presence on earth, a little digging reveals that not a few Christians grapple with the veracity of His divinity; some wrestle also with the Johannine dogma that Jesus is ***the*** way to the Father. The words, "*I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me,*"(John 14:6) bring comfort to some, but cause others to recoil.

Before exploring some of the reasons that these conflicting feelings might exist, consider the following. This writer recently addressed a congregation during an annual denominational meeting. During the sermon, it was stated that Christians going through difficult times ought to say the name of Jesus and claim Him as liberator, healer, deliverer, whatever the problem. One of the weaknesses of 12-step programs, it was preached, was that participants were discouraged from naming Jesus or God or any specific deity, rather, were

encouraged to simply refer to a "Higher Power." The following excerpt is taken from a letter the preacher received shortly afterward:

> I have many friends in 12-step programs who have difficulty identifying Jesus Christ with an unconditionally loving God. This is often true because some have only felt judgment and painful isolation in the church and have (rightly or wrongly) related that to Jesus himself.[1]

While the idea is of many people being in 12-step programs who are not Christian have problems with Jesus, the point was the ***Christians*** were having problems with Jesus. That was and is disturbing.

If we make an assumption that more Christians than we might think have serious problems with Jesus, accepting Him as liberator, divine mediator, son of God, then we of course must examine the reasons why. Why is it, as a woman who was at the same denominational annual meeting whispered to the preacher, *"we never hear about Jesus in our churches"?* What is wrong with Jesus or with the way He has been presented? It should be true, as H. Richard Niebuhr states in his classic, Christ and Culture, that Christians have "this in common: that Jesus Christ is their authority and that the one who exercises these various kinds of authority is the same Christ."[2] But that may very well not be the case, and the question must be asked, "Why?"

Niebuhr offers some reasons that may deserve discussion. In explaining how Christianity and culture have always, since Jesus' own time, clashed, he writes that attacks on Christ and Christianity have been made by those who

> ... see in them the foes of culture. The forgiveness that Christ practices and teaches is said to be irreconcilable with the demands of justice or the free man's sense of moral responsibility. The injunctions of the Sermon on The Mount concerning anger

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[1] Taken from letter received by Rev. Timothy Ahrens, pastor of North Congregational Church, UCC, in Columbus, Ohio.

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row Publishing 1951), p. 13.

> and resistance to evil, oaths, and marriage, anxiety and property, are found incompatible with the duties of life in society.[3]

While Niebuhr is making a cultural, and therefore, corporate, cache of reasons for disillusionment with Jesus, some of those may safely be lifted and transferred to the individual. Many African Americans, for example, have trouble with Jesus' message of forgiveness, because they feel that it has been preached to them to the detriment of their individual growth. Indeed, the "turn the other cheek" directive, operative in the Civil Rights movement of the 60's,brought great societal progress for African Americans, but also spawned militant response from those who found the ethic repulsive. In a Bible class for African Americans examining popular perceptions of Jesus, this forgiveness message, wrapped in Jesus' overall love ethic, was found to have produced a great amount of anger against Jesus. These students still hold onto Jesus, but at times with great difficulty. Further discussion revealed that many of them felt the forgiveness motif, along with the message to be obedient to their masters, had been preached to their particular ethnic group in such a way as to have demeaned them, and while they recognized that preachers had delivered the word, Jesus was the ultimate 'probe' because it was supposedly his message, hence, the anger.

Some women, too, feel some degree of animosity or at least confusion, toward the person of Jesus. Women questioned (both African American and white) for this paper were found to have problems with the connectedness of Jesus' divinity with his masculinity. Jacquelyn Grant, in White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus, writes:

> Since man is limited by his social context and interests, Jesus Christ has been defined within the narrow parameters of the male consciousness... The critical question to answer at this time is what has the church (male theologian) taught about Jesus, and how have these teachings functioned with regard to women?[4]

Although this question might be a common one among white feminists, a

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[3] Ibid, p. 9.

[4] Jacquelyn Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response. (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 64.

surprising number of minority women have the same problem. Korean theologian Hyung Kyung Chun rocked the most recent gathering of the World Council of Churches in Australia when she openly proclaimed that Jesus for her had no meaning - not as He had been taught by Western theologians - until she could make some changes in her thinking. All along, she said, she had thought of God as a white man with white hair who was "very mean" and who would only like her if she was a certain way. That image and impression collided with her cultural pulling which ascribed mercy and tenderness and understanding to any deity. It was not until she could begin to free herself from the Western notion of religion and Jesus that she began to grow spiritually. She had to acknowledge that her reading of the Bible did not show that God had decreed that a people had to deny who they were in order to be Christian. She began to understand that ***she*** was the text for Christianity and that the Bible was the ***context*** in which and from which she functioned. That revelation freed her to be able to identify a God who ***could*** look more Korean than Caucasian, more merciful than vengeful, more female than male. She now embraces Jesus where she previously rejected Him for his relationship to the mean, white God. She has been bitterly criticized by Western theologians as being "syncretistic," i.e., reducing God to cultural definition. The question must be asked, however, why it is this type of cultural identification is syncretistic only if the identification is done by a culture or society other than Western Anglo-Saxon?

There are yet other reasons why Jesus has only a fair rating with some Christians. There is some concern as to how to receive Jesus when the Kingdom of God, which he preached, has yet to come. Christians are still waiting for the parousia, some 2,000 years after the fact, and there is a nagging

fear on the part of some Christians, that ***maybe*** what Jesus talked about may not be truth. And if, they reason by substitution, one cannot really believe in the Second Coming, how can they believe in salvation? Some Christians carry quietly the Nietzschian notion that God is dead - at least, God as He has been presented in relation to Jesus. If salvation is a reality, if God ***is*** going to "come again," then why is it taking so long?

Christians have questions concerning what they perceive as God's (ergo, Jesus') ***powerlessness*** in society, and Christianity's silence when one would have supposed loud, moral outrage. The questions are asked, "Why were Christians silent during the Holocaust?" and "How can Christians be racist?" or "Why hasn't Jesus/God prevented the proliferation of evil in the world?" Christians have great skepticism because the miracles they have read in the Bible, the morality they have deciphered from the Gospels, have not transferred from the Bible to the present day. And these same Christians are discouraged.

If we then assume, for the purpose of this paper, that there is a problem, what is its etiology? Is it because, as Leonardo Boff asserts, "the preacher is now preached"?[5] Is the problem one of organized religion and not Jesus at all? That is to say, has organized religion distorted the person and message of Jesus? Is the problem cultural? Is it that there has been an attempt to impose one culture's notion of Jesus on the world and that imposition has produced serious backlash? Is there disenchantment because of a nagging desire to identify an historical Jesus which unequivocally confirms his dual nature?

As these questions surface, one might ask, exasperated, "So what?" What is the big deal with Christians having problems with Jesus? The "big

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[5] Leonardo Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator. A Critical Christology For Our Time. (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p.24.

deal" is, for this writer at least, a belief that because there are so many questions and concerns about Jesus by Christians, so much doubt and skepticism, that the real value of Jesus - i.e, the power to transform and empower those who confess Him, has been largely lost. Leonardo Boff writes, and this writer agrees, that "no one can study Christ and remain indifferent."[6] This paper would go one step further, however, and assert that no one can confess Jesus the Christ and not be radically changed. The assertion stems from personal theology and experience.

This paper, then, will examine some of the issues presented. Through examination of some of those issues and questions, and through consideration of material received from a Bible class designed to explore this problem, we will offer a guideline manual for teaching Jesus in a way that will hopefully provide a methodology for teaching Jesus in a way which addresses concerns about him, and pave a way for deeper attachment to him and conviction about the seriousness of his gospel. We will examine three sermons by established preachers to determine how hermeneutics affects the perception of Jesus; we will also include, without comment, a sermon done by this writer which hopefully proves to be faithful to the philosophy and theology presented in this document.

[6] Ibid., p. 1.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The methodology for this document has been two-fold. For the gathering of information a questionnaire was disseminated and Bible classes were held, the purpose of which was to address problems, concerns, and questions Christians had or have about Jesus.

The structure of the class was primarily interrogatory. Students were explained the nature of the document, and were told they were being used to: (1) present questions and concerns about Jesus, and (2) help devise a construct for a manual which would be used to teach Christians about Jesus, using their concerns as an outline.

The class was conducted at Advent United Church of Christ in Columbus, Ohio, an African-American congregation within a predominantly white denomination. It was conducted for four weeks, and had about 30 students. That number represents slightly less than 10 percent of Advent's total membership of 350. In the class there were 17 women and 13 men, and the average was 35. They represented blue collar and white collar workers about evenly.

A second 'class' was held, albeit for one time, with a group which was all - white, predominantly United Methodists. They were asked some of the concerns as had been presented by the Advent group. They were also given the questionnaire which they filled out and turned in immediately.

The weakness of the classes is that the responses were not recorded; all

responses, questions and concerns were written down, anonymously, by the teacher. The first class of the four-session class was devoted to finding out what these particular Christians felt about Jesus. The second class was devoted to trying to find the Biblical justifications for these perceptions. The third and fourth classes entailed students giving an outline for 2 class on Jesus which they felt would address their needs.

While some of the actual questions and concerns about Jesus are presented in the document, the outline for a class on Jesus which was given by the students is given here:

Class Structure

I. Questions and Concerns

II. The varieties of Jesus (based on denominations, different cultures, etc.)

III. Jesus' divinity: an exploration

IV. Jesus as depicted in art: How did the Anglicized version of Jesus come to be the image?

IV. Aspects of Jesus' personality.

a. Gentleness
b. Love
c. Anger
d. Sexist or not? Did he have to be male to be divine?
e. Sinlessness - Was his temptation real?
f. Humanness vs. his divinity.

VII. Socioeconomic interpretations of Jesus - the "rich" vs. "poor" and "privileged" vs. "oppressed" perceptions of Jesus.

VIII. African perceptions of Jesus: how have they been altered by "Westernization"?

IV. Unhealthy perceptions and misinterpretations of Jesus.

a. Physical
b. Social
c. Religious/denominational

X. Jesus and Christian doctrine

a. Trinity
b. Virgin Birth
c. Incarnation
d. Resurrection

XI. When is Jesus coming back - or is he?

Students hoped that the above outline would help address and examine their questions and concerns, some of which included:

1. The teaching of Jesus as the ***only*** intercessor.
2. The image of Jesus as male and white.
3. The perception of Jesus as forever tolerant, never angry.
4. The apparent need for Christians to be willing to be submissive to the point of martyrdom, if necessary.
5. The lack of obvious intervention of Jesus in the face of evil.
6. The need for Jesus and his parents to have been devoid of sexuality. Does this stifle immersion into Christianity of single adults struggling with their sexuality?
7. Can Jesus be detached from notions of control used to perpetuate powerlessness? Is Jesus a power threat? To whom?
8. Can we ever get an accurate image of Jesus?

Some of the statements surrounding those concerns are included in the document, but a couple more bear inclusion of as to give the nature of concerns raised.

I. "I have never thought about his divinity." (male, white, pastor)

II. "I'm not clear on his divinity. I've questioned the sacredness of scripture, and I question the divinity of Jesus, because I question scripture as ***the*** authoritative word. That brings problems -- there's a problem of exclusivity. What happens to all the Hindu people? I reject the Biblical statement, "No man can get to the Father except by me." (female, black, college professor)

"I have no problem with accepting his model for living - but that doesn't mean I accept his divinity." (female, black, college student)

"I've always wanted to buy the fact that God sent him, but I can't." (female, black, unemployed)

"I don't know what I think about Jesus. I don't put that much stock in him, though." (Female, white, housewife).

"We've had a lot of preachers who never mentioned Jesus" (female, white, retired)

"I like it when Jesus showed anger." (female, black, college student)

"Jesus is the reason we're still down." (male, black, white collar worker)

"When I was coming up, I never read the Bible, so I didn't know much about Jesus. The priests told us everything. They said the Bible was a very complicated book and that we shouldn't try to read it. So everything I know about Jesus -- which isn't much -- was given to me through the interpretation of my parish priest." (female, white, secretary)

"What I want to know is, why is it ***we*** have to wait until we die to have good things, like peace, or stuff like that? Far as I can see, Jesus hasn't done a whole lot for black folks. I've been pretty mad about Jesus for a long time." (male, black, white collar worker)

The Questionnaire

Two questionnaires (included in the appendix) were made up and disseminated for this document. They were sent to denominations including Baptist, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal and Lutheran. The racial mix was about half white, half black. Depending on the size of a given church, it was sent either ten or twenty questionnaires; pastors were asked to randomly select people to fill them out, or to distribute them in Bible classes.

As of this writing, the questionnaires are still being returned. Results will be included when the analysis is complete.

CHAPTER 3

"WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?"

If we are going to plunge into and explore what Christians think about Jesus, then it might make sense at least to define, for the purposes of this paper, what a Christian actually is. While the most obvious trait of a Christian - belief in and profession of Jesus the Christ, might be assumed to be uniformly held by all Christians may not be the case, it might also be discovered that the basic tenets of Christianity as espoused by Jesus are neither uniformly practiced or even respected.

Let us begin by stating an absolute: that a Christian ***must*** believe in and profess and confess Jesus as the Son of God. That not being the case, a person might well practice Judaism or Hinduism, be a Buddhist or a member of a non-denominational sect. Any person who says he or she is Christian must at least believe in and confess Jesus.

This scant definition might already pose questions and concerns for some. Indeed, during one of the Bible classes conducted in preparation for this paper, one student asked if it wasn't possible to be a Christian and not say Jesus, or just refer to God and his Son as "higher beings." Another student, while saying that she believed that Jesus had in fact existed and ***might*** be the Son of God, that she could not believe Jesus was ***the only*** way to God the Father. Other students addressed their doubts that Jesus was ***divine*** as well as human. Most said they had never really thought about Jesus' divinity, but upon pondering the issue, found that they were doubt-filled.

The question of the relationship of Jesus to God, and of the need for Christians to believe that He is ***THE ONLY*** way to get to God, has been, historically, and is, currently, a painful one. To limit God to Jesus, i.e., to put boundaries on the ways by which God can be reached, is to demote His character. God the omnipotent, the omnipresent, the Alpha and Omega, desires to be reached, to be respected, to be loved, and it would seem that it is beyond the bounds of any human mind to understand and define how He will hear us. God is a God of different cultures and all believe in God, but not all of them believe in Jesus. Visiting West Africa not long ago, this writer recalls seeing a young Ghanaian boy who had just had an automobile accident, sobbing and praying in the middle of the road not far from the accident site. We who approached him in our truck were admonished, warned, not to bother him because he was praying to God. He was in agony, not because of his car, which was moderately damaged, but because he had hit a tree, thereby disturbing part of God - His creation of nature - by hitting that tree. I asked if the young man was a Christian, and my companion said no, that he practiced the area's indigenous religion, but that he deeply believed in God.

This writer has to believe that this young man was no less close to God than a practicing Christian, and that God, the creator of the ends of the earth, heard his cry as he would any Christian. That young man practiced his religion, Christians must practice theirs. This definition - that a Christian must believe in and profess and confess Jesus - falls short of saying that a Christian must believe that Jesus is the ***only*** way to get to God. For this writer, a Christian, it is true that Jesus is the way. But this writer is not prepared to limit the ways by which God can be reached. Believing in, professing and confessing Jesus as

the Son of God is necessary for any confessing Christian, which means that Christians must believe that this Son of God was crucified and resurrected in order that salvation for all might be realized. Therefore, Christians must believe that belief in Jesus the Christ is necessary in order to enjoy eternal life.

The question will be thrown, that if one does not believe in Jesus as ***the*** mediator between humans and God, or if one does not believe that a person must believe in Jesus in order to be heard by God, can that person enjoy salvation? That is a difficult question to answer, because while this writer's theology presupposes a connection between God, Jesus and salvation, this writer does not know the extent of how God works in other cultures and religions. Salvation is the crux of Christianity, but this writer does not know what the centers are of other religions. It is known that there are great similarities between Jesus and other cultural mediators, i.e., the ethics qualities of those mediators are similar. But this writer simply does not know if salvation as Christians define it is the goal of other religions. Therefore, this writer is reluctant to cast toward hell all those who do not embrace Jesus as the Son of God; this writer cannot agree that Jews and Hindus and Islamics, etc., are doomed because they don't confess Jesus. They are not lesser human beings because they do not confess Jesus. But they cannot enjoy salvation as Christians can because the prerequisites for salvation as Christians know it are ***confession*** of Christ, ***belief*** that Christ is the Son of God, and that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9).

This writer, though, staunchly believes one thing: that if one believes in and confesses Jesus, and practices Christianity, one will be radically changed and radically moved toward reconciliation between him/herself and God, and

between him/herself and other human beings. This writer also believes that for a Christian, Jesus must be perceived as the answer and way to and through our problems. This writer agrees with Leonardo Boff,

> Yesterday, as well as today, admiration for Jesus is at the basis of Christology... We today, like people of all ages, search for this reconciling and totalizing reality. Hence we call him the Christ, the awaited, the anointed, the promised one. We find realized in his life, death and resurrection what the human heart seeks and what God promised would be our future.[7]

The theology of this paper, that Christians must uphold Jesus as the Way, is supported by Boff when he writes:

> Christ is an absolute within history. Many people have appeared and have helped us to travel in the direction of God, whether in the religious, cultural, political, or psychological dimension. But no one succeeded in showing us a radical liberation from all alienating forces, ranging from sin to death.[8]

As we move through this part of the discussion, a natural question might arise: if Jesus is an "absolute," as Boff contends, why is it possible to find so many ***versions*** of Him? We will discuss this more fully later, but to put the question in perspective, we must ask, if the Gospels are cut and dry as to Jesus' teachings, despite variations in the presentations of those teachings, how can there be a Jesus in the midst of a white, deeply religious church and or culture, and there be rampant, festering racism? How can a Christian, who certainly has read Jesus' words and might be assumed to understand the message of those words, be like, for instance, Adolf Hitler, devout Roman Catholic who supposedly went to mass every day but murdered millions? If Jesus is, for Christians, the absolute mediator, not only between God and humankind, but

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[7] Leonardo Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology For Our Times (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 233.

[8] Ibid, p. 235.

between humans as well, how can a Christian love Jesus and therefore God, yet practice hatred?

Perhaps the reason, or at least one reason, is that the present-day Jesus is not a representation of the historical figure, but a representation of centuries of different interpretations, of that historical figure. That Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived and died is not disputed as an historical reality. Unfortunately, however, there was not biographer of Jesus, not in the true sense of the word. There were people who loved him and followed him, and who, after he died, wrote about him. But they wrote from oral accounts, primarily, and from fervent testimonies of those who knew him. They (those who wrote the Gospels) also write in such a way as to convince readers of the "theos" of Jesus, i.e., he was divine in human form, come to earth for God. This writer does not have a problem with the different depictions of Jesus, as found in the Synoptic and in the Gospel of John; any two biographers of one person will write from a different perspective and present yet different aspects of the same person.

What does tend to be a problem, however, is that , within the different interpretations of Jesus, it seems that entirely different and disconnected variable 'Jesus' figures have evolved, allowing an equally diverse number of ways of interpreting the Scriptures, specifically, the Gospels and Jesus' directions for humankind. John Bowden says, and this writer concurs, that "we should be aware of the bewildering number of contrasting types of Christianity and the equally bewildering variety of its Christ."[9] In pointing out the 'different' Jesus - prototypes which have evolved over time and through culture, Bowden continues.

Already the contrasts have begun to mount up, and we have

[9] John Bowden, Jesus: The Unanswered Questions (Nashville: Abirigdon Press, 1988), p. 51.

> barely begun. We might feel that our tour was not ambitious enough, and want to set off on our own, say round the African churches, contrasting the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa with the churches of independent African nations. We might want to see more of the churches of south-East Asia, or Latin America, with their widely differing cultural, social and economic situations. We might want to look at the ethos of black American Christianity with its ... oppression, discrimination and deprivation in the context of a rich society."[10]

Even after all that, states Bowden, the "1,000 pages of the World Christian Encyclopedia published in 1982" have contained within them 20,800 ***Christian*** denominations.[11]

The fact of the vast number of Christian denominations would not be so troubling were it not for the reality of at least that number of different Jesus, each one with a new "face," per se, and an independent code of ethics. Thus, there can be a Jesus of apartheid Dutch Reformed Churches, and a Jesus of a hate-filled German Roman Catholic named Hitler; a Jesus who "walks and talks" with the Klansman who finds Biblical justification for racial hatred. The Jesus of the fundamental right-wing seems to allow certain moral behavior which the Jesus of an African American religion might decry - and, ironically, all these religions pull their Jesus figures from the same Gospels! Through the figure of Jesus, groups and cultures have expressed their hopes and priorities, and the Christ-depiction, based on the group doing the defining, has ***historically*** varied. Thus we have an "apocryphal and heretical Jesus, the Christ of the Barbarian invasions, the Carolinian Christ, the Christ of the conquistadors, the pietistic Christ, the Christ of the French Revolution," the Christ of the American Revolution[12] and Civil War. Albert Schweitzer calls this obvious depiction of

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[10] Ibid, p.53.

[11] Ibid, p. 53.

[12] Ibid, p. 68.

Jesus as a function of a particular cultural, social or political need a ***projection***;[13] Cain Hope Felder calls, it ***triumphalism***,[14] meaning that the dominant social group of a particular time creates "Christ in its own image" to further its political and economic program. This sort of Christ imaging was perhaps most obvious during the time of the Roman Empire, when, despite his purported "lowly estate," Jesus was depicted as a king, or royalty, suggesting to the Romans, Gentile and Christian alike - the service to the king was favorable in God's sight. The same sort of triumphalism has been obvious in the depiction of Jesus as a male, offending women, and as a white, blue-haired blonde, suggesting the "Anglo-Saxoness" of God, and thereby offending minority Christians of all ethnicites.

Despite all these variations in the imaging of Jesus, because of the presence of the Gospels and the clear-cut message contained within them, there ought to be a line of consistency threading the 20,800 denominational Jesus-creations. As stated by H. Richard Niebuhr, "However great the variations among Christians in experiencing that Jesus Christ is their authority and that the one who exercises these various kinds of authority is the same Christ."[15] To say it rather simplistically, a Christian ought to be a Christian. There ought to be recognizable behavior, adherence to a common ethical ethos, an acknowledgement of specific lessons Jesus gave to all his followers, regardless of denomination. A Christian understands the basic and core message of Jesus, or ought to, and that basic, core message ought to be understood rather universally.

Thus, to extend this discussion logically, a Christian is one who believes

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[13] Albert Schweitzer,

[14] Cain Hope Felder, Troubling Biblical Waters.

[15] H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ & Culture.

in the reconciliatory function of Jesus: i.e., he came to earth so that humans could be reconciled toe God and to each other. According to Boff, "the cross is the symbol of the reconciliation of opposites: the sign of human hatred and love of God."[16] He says Jesus

> ... represents the conciliation of human opposites. Human history is ambiguous, made of peace and war, love and hatred, liberation and oppression. Christ assumed this human condition and reconciled it. Persecuted, contested, rejected, imprisoned, tortured, killed, he did not pay back in the same coin."[17]

This role of Jesus has caused some Christians no few problems. Read this particular quote, one Bible study student, questioned for this paper, scoffed and said, "that's what's wrong with Christianity and one of the reasons why I've had problems with Jesus. This "turn the other cheek stuff doesn't work in the real world!" Although we will discuss the love ethic of Jesus and how it has been used and misused later in this work, it is important to state here, as we ***define*** a Christian, that this reconciliatory role ought to be embraced. A criticism of the conciliatory ideal from some is that it "only applies to some Christians" "White folks don't get that lesson," remarked one student. "We're taught to seek peace even at the expense of our own self dignity and be comforted that when we die, we'll be rewarded. White folks are taught to seek their happiness now and worry about how they'll feel when they die when they're about to die." Indeed, it does seem to the concerned or confused Christian, one who is trying to follow this particular interpretation of Jesus' message, that more rather than fewer ***Christians*** follow the ethic of "I've got mine; you get your's," or, "Don't get mad. Get even" And that seems to be a direct contradiction to what many Christians, especially minority and Third World converts, have been taught.

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[16] Boff, p. 237.

[17] Ibid, p. 237.

During a class on this subject, one student, who had been silent throughout the evening, spoke up. We had viewed a videotape on which Korean theologian Hyung Kyung Chun had criticized the way Christianity had been taught to her and her people. "God was white, he was mean, and old....," she said, among other things, "and we were taught that if we followed any of our cultural beliefs, like ancestor worship, that we were going to go to hell, where we'd burn because it was so hot." Chun, then, began to be confused and frightened of her own culture. One evening, when she had been engaged in talking with their ancestors, she ran to her mother, terrified of going to hell. Her mother, a Christian, reassured her that everything was all right, that her ancestors were necessary because Jesus was so busy he needed secretaries to help him handle everyone." "My mother was a Christian," said Chun, "but when she had a problem, she went to (sic) Buddhist Temple." This student, after hearing Chun's comments, finally spoke up. "That's my problem with Jesus. He was presented to me in the image of my enemy. Missionaries came and taught us that this enemy was the bearer of a better life, all the while they were tearing us from our culture and subjugating us. And Jesus was and still is, the agent." With this type of feeling, the conciliatory message that Boff points out is difficult to adhere to, but, this writer feels, one that ***all*** Christians ought to embrace. It is unfortunate that this culture - annihilation has been a tool of proselytizing Christians, historically. Chun was received poorly by so-called mainline theologians, who accused her of syncretism. As the change was made by a group which was primarily Western theologians, representing the culture which has been responsible for the definition of Christianity with all its cultural inclusions, it was noted by Dr. Thomas Dipka, conference minister in Ohio for

the United Church of Christ, that the charge of syncretion is only made when another culture does what Western, Anglo Saxon culture, has historically done. In order for Jesus to be accepted, he had to be inundated with "westernisms": an Anglo-Saxon look, a priestly, or relatively affluent socioeconomic status, and western values. Dr. John Cook, professor of "Religion and the Arts" at Yale Divinity School teaches how, artistically, Jesus had to be afforded the look of a king in order to be accepted by society. People could not accept the "lowly" status of Jesus as described in the Bible. What then, is that, if not syncretism? Given that reality, Professor Chung's as well as the student's complaint that the majority culture guarded its syncretistic Jesus jealously, at the expense of tearing them from their own culture, holds credence. More discussion on Jesus and culture will follow later.

As we continue with our definition of what a Christian is, let us submit that a Christian is one who succumbs to the so-called "Christic structure", and who is therefore in communion with God.[18] Boff defines this Christic structure as the giving of love (from God through Jesus) and the knowledge and willingness to receive that love by the Christian. In order for the formula to be and to remain intact, there must be both giver and recipient of the love, Boff writes:

> "If we wish to formulate the christic structure in other words, we can say that it consists in a response to a divine proposal, given with responsibility. God gives himself to human beings. He makes us a proposal of communion, of love, of union with him. To this divine proposal, human beings must give a response. Reciprocity demands that love received be repaid with love... To accept another's proposal of love is already a giving of love and a response. Hence, knowing how to receive love is one form of giving, perhaps the most original form of giving, because it creates the atmosphere indispensable for encounter, dialogue and growth of love.[19]

[18] Ibid, pp. 251-252.

[19] Ibid, p. 254.

This formula, or adherence to it, is a major component of the make-up of what or who a Christian is, because it implies, as Jesus followed the formula in his relationship with his heavenly Father, so must all those who call themselves Christian do likewise and try to live as Jesus lived. This directive is no small feat. Boff writes:

> Christianity is concrete and consistent living in a christic structure, a living of that which Jesus of Nazareth lived: total openness to others and the Great other; indiscriminate love, unshakeable fidelity to the voice of conscience, and the overcoming of whatever chains human beings to their own egoism.[20]

Indeed, one of the biggest struggles of human beings, be they Christian or otherwise, is letting go of that very egoism of which Boff writes, and for many, the thought of releasing 'self' to an unseen Spirit is problematic. To release that 'self' and act like Jesus, whom many perceive to be weak-both physically and emotionally - causes the very souls of the very Christians of whom this is required, to recoil. One student, discussing this very issue, said she wasn't at all sure she wanted to be like Jesus, and if being a Christian should mean that Jesus-like behavior was absolutely required, then she was ready to admit and accept a personal Christianity which fell short of the goal. Again, minority Christians feel somewhat embittered about not the way Jesus was, apparently, but about how his approach to perfection was manipulated and used against them in order to maintain political, economic, and social control over them. Upon further discussion, some of these same minorities admit that Jesus' way of life was admirable, but they wonder if adherence to it is entirely realistic in a hostile world. Boff writes that 'Christians are not simply ones who profess Christ with their lips, but ones who, yesterday, and today, live the structure and the

[20] Ibid, p. 250.

comportment that Christ lived: forgiveness, complete openness to God, etc."[21] For Boff, such behavior on the part of Christians leads to a whole new self-reality, unbound and unfettered by the world. By so living, he says, human beings are fully realized... "By being in the other, we are within ourselves. By going out of ourselves, we arrive at ourselves. It is only by existing (sic) ... that we become."[22] This is a wonderful ideal, not too often realized in human beings. While we are not prepared to say that if one does not meet this ideal, he or she is not a Christian, we can say that a Christian versed in the Gospels ought to understand the centrality of this role for Christians and ought to be reaching toward attainment of the ideal.

It would seem as we move through these "requirements" to be a Christian, that in order to live as Jesus did, one would have to accept that Jesus had divine help: i.e., to be able to supersede or transcend the human condition, Jesus would have had to have been "divine" as well as human, indeed, as John says, the "Word made flesh." And we posit here that a Christian must believe in the ***divinity*** of Jesus. That means, they must believe in the Virgin Birth, believe Jesus was (or is) the Son of God, believe he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

Interestingly, the question of Jesus' divinity is one that has made Christians stumped. One woman student summed up the confusion on the issue thusly: "I'm not clear on his divinity. Because I've questioned the sacredness of Scripture, I've questioned Jesus' divinity. Did people just choose to create the Jesus myth? I question Scripture as ***the*** authoritative word. I have a problem with John's record of Jesus saying, "No man can get to the Father

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[21] Ibid, p. 245.

[22] Ibid, p. 251.

except by me." What, then, happens to all of the Hindu people?"

Students voice concern over Jesus' divinity because of the Virgin Birth; one student said she didn't have a problem with accepting his model for living, but "that doesn't mean I accept his divinity."

Still another student, a clergyman, showed obvious discomfort when confronted with the question. "I never thought about it, but now that I ***am*** thinking about it, I realize I'm not sure I do accept his divinity."

A fairly significant number of persons asked voiced doubt that a Christian must accept Jesus' divinity or that they buy the idea that a Christian's belief or disbelief in Jesus points to a consequential belief or disbelief in God. "Jesus and God are two different entities," offered one student. "I believe in God. Jesus, I don't really know."

Since for this paper we are suggesting that a ***Christian*** must accept Jesus' divinity, and since we are also suggesting that it may perhaps be true that many Christians doubt that divinity, should we offer that it is ok to doubt the divinity of Jesus, his sonship to God, and still profess belief in God? Conversely, if one does not accept Jesus' divinity, has one ultimately rejected God?

In answer to that question, let us say "yes," rejection of God is ultimately the result of the rejection of Jesus' divinity, since it was Jesus' divinity which afforded him his power on earth. Taken a step further, it was Jesus' divinity which gave him ***his*** faith in God. That faith allowed him to be radically obedient, even to his ultimate death; that faith allowed him his deep humility, his hope, and his love. If, as we have already decided, a Christian must seek to be as Jesus was, and to live as he lived, then we must understand that, first, he could

not have been who he was or lived like he did ***without*** being divine, and that second, ***we*** cannot be as he was unless we believe in that divinity and ask God for a small portion of it! Humans alone cannot effect "perfect love" or "peace" in the midst of a storm, yet that's what Jesus preached, lived, and expects from us. There was no Jesus unless there was first God; thus, as Niebuhr says, "... any of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to the understanding of his character and teaching; but each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God."[23] Niebuhr further asserts that "... belief in Jesus Christ ... always means belief in God."[24] If this line of reasoning is accepted, then we understand Jesus not merely as the ***Son*** of God, but as the continuum from God; Jesus and his virtues cannot be detached from his relation to and connectedness to God.

That Christians might have a problem with this relationship and thus with the concept or the reality of Jesus' divinity was surprising to this writer until it was pointed out that this has been an age-old dispute. As far back as 451 A.D. there was a need for the drafting of the Chalcedonian Definition, which, according to John Bowden, was "... a satisfactory way of explaining, in the conceptuality of Platonism philosophy, how Jesus could at the same time be both God and man..."[25] It seems that God's plan of making His divine son also ***very*** human has historically produced faith problems for the would-be believer. Christians, it seems, have a need to believe in a God who looks and acts in a certain way; hence, the pictures of Jesus depicting him as a royal personage as opposed to a humble servant, for example. Jesus' humanity put him ***too close*** to the human condition, and the feeling seems to be that anyone that

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[23] Niebuhr, p. 27.

[24] Ibid, pp. 27-28.

[25] Bowden, p. 72.

immanent cannot at the same time be transcendent, and transcendence seems to be a requirement for divinity. Hence, one of the major doctrines of Christianity, the incarnation, stands in the midst of a storm. When the Chalcedonian Definition was written in 451 A.D., there had already been two centuries of controversy; that controversy has not yet been stilled. Bowden notes that modern-day Christians are at somewhat of a disadvantage, since,

> ...we can look at the doctrinal statements of Christianity as human constructions, negotiated by fallible human beings against the background of the culture of their time as a result of particular developments ... and on the basis of particular presuppositions.[26]

Hence, we, unlike the Christians of the third century, do not accept ***any*** doctrine, or, for that matter, any book, as ***the*** last word on any issue,[27] and we are (or may be) at a disadvantage when trying to come to grips with some of the more difficult doctrinal questions.

Some might ask why it is a Christian should acknowledge Jesus' divinity when they would say that it is not clear that Jesus acknowledged such divinity himself. They might agree with Professor James Dunn, who asks:

> Did the doctrine of the incarnation begin with Jesus? If we accept the possibility of penetrating some way into Jesus' own self-consciousness, ... what do we fine? We find one who was conscious of being God's Son... we find one who claimed to be inspired by the Spirit of God, to be a prophet in the tradition of prophets but more than that, to be the eschatological prophet... We find one who may well have claimed to speak as the final envoy of

[26] Ibid, p. 74. The Chalcedonian Definition (or part of it) states: Following then the holy fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same consisting of a rational soul and body: *homoousios* ... with the Father as to Godhead and the same *homoiousios* with us as to his manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of the Father before ages as to his Godhead and in the last days, the same, for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to his manhood.

[27] This is a dangerously general statement, as there are denominations and individuals who do accept established doctrine and the Bible as authoritative. It may be safe to say, however, that there does not exist the widespread acceptance of the Bible and Christian doctrine as infallible as there was in the third century and leading into the Middle Ages.

> Wisdom ... But there is no indication that Jesus thought or spoke of himself as having preexisted with God prior to his birth or appearance on earth. Such self-assertions appear only in the latest form of the canonical Gospel tradition, and presuppose substantial developments in Christological thinking which cannot be traced back to Jesus himself.[28]

Criticisms of the Doctrine of the Incarnation abound, fueled by theologians' intrusions and reintrusions into its validity and veracity. A full discussion on those debates and criticisms far exceeds the intended scope of this meager document. For our purposes, however, as we define a Christian, we posit that any person professing to be a Christian must accept both his humanity and divinity; to deny this divinity is to deny his connectedness to God and therefore his reason for being made human in the first place.

Finally, as we end this discussion of what a Christian is, does a Christian have to believe Jesus was the Messiah (savior) in order to be a Christian? Surprisingly, a significant number of people queried for this paper said "no." Bowden notes:

> "... Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah" and was used as a title of honor for Jesus from the earliest Greek-speaking communities on ... it is almost unanimously recognized by New Testament scholars that Jesus never used the title 'Messiah' (Christ) of himself ... The title 'Christ' was used of Jesus after the resurrection by the earliest churches.[29]

What are we to do, then, with the words recorded in the Gospel of John: "That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him." (John. 3:16-17) NIV. Jesus is not using the word "messiah" or "Christ," but he is certainly recorded as saying his task is one of saving human beings from

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[28] James D. G. Dunn, Christology in the Making (London: SCM Press and Westminster Press, 1980), p. 253.

[29] Bowden, p. 7.

eternal condemnation. It would seem that belief in this function of Jesus is one which is both basic and fundamental to the Christian ethos. Why else the suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus? How else to make sense of present-day human suffering? Although Bowden's observation inspires further study and inquiry on the part of this writer, for this paper we posit that a Christian must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior - i.e., the agent through which salvation must be achieved.

CHAPTER 4

THE COURSES OF NEGATIVE POPULAR PERCEPTION: JESUS, CULTURE & ORGANIZED RELIGION

If indeed there are some negative popular perceptions of Jesus, by Christians we do well by trying to identify some of the sources. This writer found it surprising (although on reflection the naivete seems unfounded) that people, Christian and non-Christian, have had problems with Jesus since he was actually here. It was Jesus who challenged extant political authority, Jesus who openly criticized extant religious authority. It was Jesus who made religious and secular leaders squirm uneasily in their positions as people who had theretofore given them unquestioning allegiance now turned to Jesus for new possibilities in their lives. Niebuhr writes that "not only Jews, but also Greeks and Romans, medievalists and moderns, Westerners and Orientals, have rejected Jesus because they saw in him a threat to their culture."[30] Indeed their culture against Jesus, and in so doing, have raised issues about Jesus to support their negative impressions of him. If we refer again to Cain Hope Felder's use of the term "triumphalism", referred to earlier in this paper, we may begin to understand that underlay for this negative reaction. There has been at least from the time of the emergence of Greek thought with its dialectalism, a need for a "greater" and a "lesser," for a "superior" and an "inferior." In the Christian world, that "superior" has historically been a Western power structure, complete with its belief system; its economic and sociopolitical base, and so on. And in order for this Western system to survive, there has been a need for an

[30] Niebuhr, Christ and Culture. p. 4.

"inferior," namely, anything which did not or does not adhere to the Western way of doing things. When, then, elements within this "triumphant" socio-political-religious-economic system have arisen in challenge to that well established "superior", there has been significant backlash and an attempt to preserve the extant system at any cost. James H. Cone notes that, "The basic differences between White and Black theologians, in North America and in Europe, stem from a radical difference in the economic, social and political power of the communities from which our theologies arise."[31] Niebuhr, recognizing the problem, explains it further:

> The historical and social situations in which such rejections of Jesus Christ have taken place have been extremely various, the personal and group motivations of opponents have been of many sorts; the philosophical and scientific beliefs which have been sharply opposed to the convictions themselves. Yet in so far as the relation of Jesus Christ to culture is concerned, considerable unanimity is found among these disparate critics. Ancient spiritualists and modern materialists, pious Romans who charge Christianity with atheism, and nineteenth century atheists who condemn its theistic faith, nationalists and humanists, all seem to be offended by the same elements in the gospel and employ similar arguments in defending their culture against it.[32]

If this idea of Niebuhr's is being correctly understood, it would seem that at the base or foundation of poor popular perceptions of Jesus is a rigid tension between two cultures, one religious and one secular. Although the two cultures would claim to have different "heads of state", per se, upon closer examination it might be observed that in reality one "head" has been operative - namely, Jesus the Christ - in either an overt or covert way. There is a deep irony here; this writer, for example, found it extremely interesting and confusing when an

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[31] Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, ed., Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), from Introduction to "Black Theology and the Response of White Theologians", p. 139.

[32] Niebuhr, p. 5.

observation was not long ago made. Here in this country, there is much to be said for the protection of the separation between church and state. Because the power heads of church and state have so frequently clashed - primarily because the church seemed to have the capability to garner and wield more power than the state - there has been a very careful and concerted effort to keep the two separate. Hence, in the Black church, there is scarcely ever mentioned the relationship between patriotism and salvation. There is not usually posted within Black churches an American flag. Independence Day, for example, is just that - independent of the religious message to be preached. This writer was thus thoroughly thrown back when, as a student doing an internship at a White church, a moment (actually, a significant portion of the worship service) was dedicated to paying homage to the United States and her flag on the occasion of one of the "patriotic" holidays. The homage rendered was moving and touching, but disconcerting as many of the people who participated in that service ***abhorred*** the notion of state and church co-mingling. The whole episode seemed ironical and, frankly, inconsistent.

Yet, if one looks closely, one can see the intermingling between church and state which has never disappeared, despite rhetoric to the contrary. The framers of the United States Constitution relied on their religious foundations to guide them It was God, they professed, who gave human beings "certain inalienable rights", it was God who had "created all men equal" - as long as they were Anglo-Saxon. The constitutional framers were wary of the church's intervention in matters of the state because they wanted this newly-formed secular culture to be unchallenged, yet, the infusion of God and God-rhetoric remained too deeply embedded in their souls to erase. Because of that

incomplete break between church and state, there was bound to be - as there is - a clash between the two cultures. Therefore, we are agreeing with Niebuhr on the reality of the conflict between Christ and culture; we merely extend his argument by asserting that the clash is actually between the ***two cultures***, religious and secular. And we agree that behind this historical clash has always loomed the figure of Jesus: present, foreboding, and powerful:

> The power of the symbol of Christ can be turned to the use of religious or secular, political or psychological manipulation, and has been and is used for such manipulation by certain parties within churches, religious movements and indeed states to further their aims or endorse certain patterns of behavior.[33]

Bowden further points to the observation made by historian Norman Baynes, who observed that:

> The basis of ... political philosophy is to be found in the conception of the imperial government as a terrestrial copy of the role of God in Heaven; there is one God and one divine law, therefore there must be on earth one ruler and a single law. That ruler, the Roman emperor, is the vice regent of the Christian God.[34]

Because we as Christians have romanticized Jesus as we have leaned on him not only as our Savior but our hero, perhaps we have lost sight of the fact that, because of the conflict described above, there never was a time when there was Jesus (or the resultant religion) and quiet acceptance. From the beginning, Jesus was a thorn in the flesh of the organized religious and political system. From the beginning, Jesus was a real challenge to the accepted heads of power. After his death, the scramble for power was even greater. There was the Roman emperor, but there was also this mysterious man, Jesus, who had apparently done nothing but good and been killed for it. People were opting for

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[33] Bowden, p. 121.

[34] Ibid, p. 12-8.

the ***wrong*** authority, and it caused a stir. Bowden notes that the Gospels capture the essence of what was going on:

> " ... any reading of the Gospel material ... chose to tell of Jesus as a reflection of his public activity are essentially stories of conflict. We hear how Jesus was in conflict with the authorities of his day, who were inevitably as well as religious - and this was conflict over the nature of power. Christians and churches who are blind to this fact and wish to restrict Christianity to some form of inwardness totally misunderstand their tradition: conflict will always be there.[35]

The nature of this conflict has many dimensions, but perhaps as a point of departure we should consider one of the criticisms launched against Jesus in the class held for this paper. Several students offered the criticism that Jesus was frightening and therefore, not likable, because in order to follow him, "you're not allowed to think for yourself." When pressed to explain further, one student said that Christians are taught to have blind faith, and not to think for oneself. That teaching (or belief that that is the teaching) flies in the face of the cultural/anthropological belief that it is the "fittest" who survive; that those who use their God-given brains are the ones who succeed. Belief that Jesus would teach one not to use his/her own cognitive ability to problem-solve keeps many Christians - and would - be Christians - at arm's length from Jesus. In defense of their position they would point out that Jesus urged prayer for success and peace in the kingdom of God - which he did - but the prayer that Jesus exercised and urged us to do likewise was an ***enabling*** and not a ***crippling*** phenomenon; through prayer, an individual gains the spiritual strength to carry out temporal duties - or to stay away from temporal temptations. Jesus certainly thought for himself when he entered the Temple and overturned the money-changers' table; he thought for himself when he conversed with the woman at

[35] Ibid, p. 131.

the well or with the woman with the issue of blood. At these moments, he was in conflict with the culture in which he lived, yet he did what he wanted. The Gospels are filled with such accounts, making the charge that Jesus encourages mindlessness in favor of blind faith an empty charge. Belief in this sort of erroneous teaching inspires hostility to Jesus on the wings of such criticism as was offered by Marx and Lenin, who posited that to believe in Jesus was to disregard temporal existence and the real needs of society in favor of an opiate to ease all woes. The assertion simply is not true.

Other criticism of Jesus, launched by pro-culturalists, include an assertion that people who believe in Jesus "cannot have any fun" as defined by culture. The Korean theologian Chung, quoted earlier, said in her videotaped interview that she was taught by Western Missionaries that Christians "cannot dance, cannot smoke, cannot have good (sic) time." So when they wanted to have fun, they would go to the Buddhist temple. Japanese novelist Shusako Endo voiced, recently, some of the same concerns, through one of his fictional characters, Suguro:

> I truly could not understand why my mother believed in such a religion. The words of the priest, the Bible stories, the crucifix - they all seemed like intangible Happenings from a past that had nothing to do with us.[36]

Endo decides in his novels that Christianity is a strange item that can be accepted only reluctantly. He decries the Christian concepts of unconditional love and sin in his book, *Wonderful Fool*, and decided only after 30 years of struggle that he could believe in and embrace Christianity. But he feels the clash between Christianity and culture, too, and says Christian churches would be more popular if they could or would do something to counteract their gloomy

[36] Shusako Endo, A 40 Year Old Man.

reputation. The Japanese, he says, "tend to think of Christians as grim people who never laugh or drink or smoke... I think the Japanese need a religion that lets them drink and laugh with friends"[37] Endo notes that only 1.23 million of Japan's 123 million citizens consider themselves Christian.

Niebuhr talks of intolerance among Christians which causes a breach between them and culture, a problem which has many dimensions. One such dimension piggybacks on the criticisms offered by Chur and Endo, above. This writer is a pastor of a new church within an established denomination, The United Church of Christ. All new members must pass through a relatively rigorous new members' class. On a particular Sunday when new members were to be formally taken into the congregation, no fewer than six of the ten children/young adults said their parents had changed their minds about letting them join the church because "if we do," voiced one young woman, "we won't be able to dance, or go to parties or wear make-up..." The situation was cleared up, but the nature of religious-social/secular cultural conflict is clear. Niebuhr further summaries the nature of the conflict.:

> The forgiveness that Christ practices and teaches is said to be irreconcilable with the demands of justice or the free man's sense of moral responsibility. The injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount concerning anger and resistance to evil, oaths and marriage, anxiety and property, are found incompatible with the duties of life in society.[38]

The intermingling of Jesus and culture is further illumined by Bowden:

> In Britain we have Mrs. Thatcher arguing that 'The Central theme of Christianity is freedom of choice,' and along the same lines Norman Tebbit invoking the parable of the Good Samaritan to justify tax cuts. In a far more sinister way the church struggle in Germany in the 1930's was above all a struggle over the use of the symbol of Jesus. The synoptic

[37] Taken from The Columbus Dispatch, Saturday, Oct. 26, 1991, page 11-H.

[38] Niebuhr, p. 9.

> Jesus was too powerful and with his Jewish origins -- too unacceptable a model to be left for unrestricted use, so attempts were made by German Christians to produce a Jesus more compatible with the aims of the Third Reich: a blonde, Nordic Aryan Jesus preaching purity of race and of the German people...[39]

Here we see the curious relationship between Jesus and culture; either there is direct and undeniable polarization between the two, or three is selective intermingling, with Jesus being used as the harbinger for the cause at hand. Which is to be relied upon? Is Jesus friend or foe of culture? Is he compatible with the exigencies of culture or is he a threat to its successful existence? As does Jesus challenge those elements of a culture that are resistant to the Kingdom of God?

Based upon reading of the Gospels and personal beliefs this writer holds the latter to be the case - that Jesus is or should be a threat to culture as we know it - and that if that tension is there, the resultant conflict will be obvious. Caution must be stated, however, in that the nature of the tension proposed by the Gospels should not lead to or support closed-mindedness, or a fundamentalism the sort of which squeezes life and joy from living. Contrary, Jesus' message is one of open-mindedness, which should lead to greater tolerance. True, it is written that we should be "in the world but not of the world" but it seems that that statement has been taken way out of context and used in a manipulative manner. It would appear, from the reading of the Gospels, that Jesus' admonition to be in the world but not of it is a "Zaccean" sort of experience: one must recognize his/her human weaknesses and agree to be reconciled to God through Jesus. Such reconciliation involves the willingness to forego wealth for spiritual fulfillment; revenge, for forgiveness; hatred and

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[39] Bowden, p. 122.

bitterness for love. To be "of" the world means to strive for material fulfillment, superiority over one's enemies, and loving oneself above all others. Jesus' message is radically different from what one deeply embedded in our culture would be required to hear.

There is perhaps a thread of naivete here, but it would seem that when a person or movement moves against culture in this way that Jesus' message is vindicated. Jesus mandates that in the event of human "immovability" it is the Christian who must practice a prideless love which will enable one to cut the tension. That is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do but this is the meaning of the cross. Humans are such that they want to win. Yet, Jesus teaches that real victory is achieved when someone takes a risk and follows the Gospel. Difficult as it may be, it seems to work. Answar Sadat followed Christian ethics, and was successful in breaking a centuries-long tension between Egypt and Israel. Michael Gorbachev is to be credited with bringing about peace in an impossible situation. A Communist from an apparently God-less nation was able to step over pride, fear, distrust, pain, and the threat of uncertainty, and in so doing, melted a barrier which grew daily and which threatened an entire people. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to begin the difficult work of mending two races together, by showing an amazing love in the face of intense hatred, in spite of cultural pressure to do differently. Cultural expectation is no less than the anticipation of one watching a football game, or a cock-fight or dog fight. Cultural expectation wants to see a fight and wants to see a winner. Culture sets up the dialectics of good and bad, superior and inferior, winner and loser. That adversarial system, however, does not work. That system must have a good guy and a bad guy, ***at any cost***. Nothing, in that system, is sacred, not

human need, human endeavor, or final outcome. At the expense of a winner, something or someone will always be destroyed.

Jesus against culture demands something different. He demands love which has attached to it patience, tolerance, and a faith that his way is effective. His way demands a courage, to stand in the face of sure opposition, and at a great cost. Sadat is dead. Dr. King is dead. Gorbachev has suffered immeasurably. Yet culture is better here and in the Middle East and in the Soviet Union because of their Christian action. And it seems that more, and not less, of this type of Christian action will have to come in order to reconcile God's world. The Israelis and the Palestinians will have to experience it; it will have to bloom between the Irish Catholics and Protestants; in South Africa, it will have to take root in the supporters of apartheid.

This is the type of anti-culturalism supported by the Gospels. Yet this is precisely what too many Christian religions and individuals sidestep in favor of more superficial "culturalism", things like not going to parties, not smoking, not drinking, not wearing make-up. It seems to have been lost on too many of Jesus' followers that one is in serious conflict with his teachings if he/she is not able to practice the extreme forms of love and forgiveness, no matter how many parties one does not attend or how plain one's face may look!

There seems to be no reason for this great disparity between what Jesus would want and not want, based on the reading of the Gospels. Niebuhr states it plainly:

> The state and Christian faith are simply incompatible, for the state is based on love of power and the exercise of violence, whereas the love, humility, forgiveness and nonresistance of Christian life draw it completely away from political measures and institutions.[40]

[40] Niebuhr, p. 61.

Acceptance of this observation by Niebuhr, however, presupposes either a uniform reading of the Gospels or, more importantly, a reading, period, of the Gospels! One of the most revealing statements to come out of the classes held for this paper came from a young woman, now a United Methodist but now a Roman Catholic. The class was discussing how it was possible for a person to be a Christian and a racist or sexist. This woman said that it has only been recently that she even began to read the Bible. "When I was coming up," she said, "we were discouraged from reading the Bible. We were told it was so difficult that it would be better if someone, namely, the priests, would interpret it for us." Asked if she heard much about Jesus or what he required of human beings, another Roman Catholic responded, "Hardly ever." Well, if a vast majority of Christians do not read the Bible, or if they rely solely upon the interpretation of the Bible from someone else, the obvious danger of Jesus' message being missed is apparent. If someone has a problem with the concept of unconditional love, of forgiveness, even when it hurts, then those aspects of Jesus' message can be easily ignored. If a dominant culture, with its attendant political, economic, and social superiority, is to be protected, there will be a reluctance to push acceptance of a Gospel which might readjust the whole society. Jesus being in conflict with culture is not hard to understand.

All of this is a wonderfully comforting message, or interpretation, of Jesus' Gospel, but it is challenged daily. Everyone does not interpret the Gospels in this way - not even churches or ministers! Why is it, for example, that more Christian ministers do not criticize racism, based on what the gospels teach? Is it lack of commitment? Is it because they don't agree that the Gospel teaches this specific sort of anti-culturalism? Is it because they cannot reconcile their

own racism to what Jesus would want? Is it because they do not read the Gospels and are therefore ***not familiar*** with what is mandated? Niebuhr writes:

> Though the churches call themselves Christian they are equally far removed from the Christianity of Jesus. Tolstoy regards them as self-centered organizations that assert their own infallibility; servants of the state defenders of the reign of violence and privilege, of inequality and property; obscurers and falsifiers of the gospel. "The Churches as churches ... are anti-Christian institutions, utterly hostile in their pride, violence, and self-assertion, immobility and death, to the humility, penitence, meekness, progress and life of Christianity."[41]

This assessment by both Nieburhr and Leo Tolstoy, if assumed to be correct, may be directly responsible for a negative impression of Jesus, held by American Blacks and other minorities. Churches are as much - and have historically been as much - a part of culture as are labor union, universities, banks and corporations. Indeed the people in the churches are the very same people who are in the labor unions, university, banks and corporations. They do not vaporize on Monday morning. No. It is the same crowd. As the church (not Church, as defined by Jesus) has been co-opted in its moral mission because of its relationship to the state, so has "selective hermeneutics" been practiced and preached. The message of obedience a slave owes its master, for example, was often and enthusiastically preached to American Blacks, in order to assure them that such earthly obedience was indeed a sign of spiritual depth. That same message - with ***all*** creatures being servant, or slave, to God and therefore being required to be obedient, was not preached to Whites in general, or more specifically, to White slave owners. Indeed, many or most slave-holders saw no contradiction between their profession of Christianity and

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[41] Ibid, p. 61.

their moral/societal practices.[42]

African Americans are angry at the schizophrenic message of Jesus - one for Whites and one for Blacks - which has been historically presented and quietly and tacitly accepted by Christians. One young man retorted angrily when asked if he had a good impression of Jesus, "It's getting better, but for a long time, I couldn't even say 'Jesus' because I was mad that ***we*** were taught we had to wait to die in order to receive good things and White folks were taught to go ahead and get their rewards now." One race, this young man was saying, was being taught to respect agape love and forgiveness, and another race was being denied (or spared!) those same messages. Jesus, in the meantime, has received the blame.

There is yet another problem, besides "selective preaching" of Jesus, that those who reject the deeper messages of Jesus in favor of superficial "don'ts" inherent in the anti-culturalist stance. We have already mentioned that reliance on such superficial "qualities" minimizes Jesus' message, and it supposes that one can truly be "in" the world, yet not "of" it. A person, an institution or an organization cannot be completely devoid of the world in which it sits. The Amish, though they reject modern culturalism, must still drive on the right side of the road when they've in their horse-pulled buggies and do share the racial exclusivism of this culture; the fundamentalists make great use of the evil they call television so as to be able to raise money to support their media ministries. Niebuhr says, "If Christians do not come to Christ with the language, the thought patterns, the moral discipline of Judaism, they come with those of Rome, if not with those of Rome then with those of Germany, England, Russia, America,

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[42] Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan , Roll. The World the Slaves Made. (New York, Random House/Vintage Books, 1972, 1974), pp. 232-255. See also, Max Weber, The Sociology of Religion (trans Ephraim Fischoffs; Boston: 1964)

India or China. Hence the radical Christians are always making use of the culture, or parts of culture, which ostensibly they reject."[43]

Jesus and Organized Religion

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his book, Dear Mr. Brown, recalls that it was Martin Luther who noted that religion "can be one of the most ruinous and wicked forces in human experience."[44] Fosdick goes on to say that:

> Religious people are ... tempted ... to divide mankind into two groups, the religious and the irreligious, and then to assume that being religious offers a certain superior quality upon them.[45]

He notes that the assumption or claim of religiosity offers no such superiority, and notes that religion has a rather dismal history: it has participated in, encouraged, or been silent in the wake of such events as wars, persecutions, rituals of human sacrifice, what Fosdick calls "ugly" superstitions, and the advancement of the very world! Religion, which has surely produced spiritual giants, has also produced and supported temporal tyrants, who in the name of God and Jesus his son, have been bigots, hypocrites, and fanatics; who have been far too narrow-minded, opinionated and intolerant, to the point of turning people quite away from Jesus. The threat of "becoming" as one of these, is to many people frightening and repugnant.

If we are going to talk about religion, (and we mean "organized" religion whenever the term is used) we might do well to define what religion is, as opposed to Christianity, for there is a distinction between the two. We also interject that "Church," or "the Church" has become attached to "religion" as

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[43] Niebuhr, p. 69.

[44] Harry Emerson Fosdick, Dear Mr. Brown (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 169.

[45] Ibid, p. 169.

opposed to Christianity, so that when we see the term "the Church," we are understood to be referring to the institution in which religion lies.

So, then, what is the difference between religion and Christianity? Religion is a system through which and in which belief-systems are defined and held. Religion is the container, so to speak, in which is carried doctrine and dogma, things like the doctrine of the Incarnation, or the Chalcedonian Definition, or the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Religion is the corporate organization of believers, complete with leaders and decision-makers; "religious" leaders reacted against Gnosticism and Arianism; "religious" leaders made sure Calvinistic theology was written, preached and practiced. "Religious" leaders have made and set policy; "religious" individuals decided that the Bible would be canonized; "religious" individuals, having defined what "sacred" was, decided what would be included in that final, canonized text. Religious leaders, concerned with the survival of organized religion, have defined and shaped orthodoxy, a phenomenon which touches us all.

But religion has another aspect, or dimension, if Fosdick is to be believed. "Religion at its fountain head is an individual, ***psychological*** (Italics mine) experience."[46] As such, it is as much a deeply personal phenomenon as it is a corporate reality. Religion as psychological experience is that which serves to give one coherence hope, peace and transcendence power. It is not bound by doctrine or dogma. Religion is that which gives the direction for daily living, and coping in the midst of great obstacles.

One does not need Jesus to be religious.

Because religion is a psychological experience, it is not, cannot be, a static phenomenon, but one which grows and flexes as its carrier does likewise.

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[46] Harry Emerson Fosdick, As I see Religion (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), p. 9.

It is not theology, written, argued and held as that which "is" or may very well "be." It is not necessarily doctrine or dogma, holding one to a position or a belief system. Religion is the indwelling of a holy spirit - a spirit which reaches the psyche, and whispers to that psyche as it writhes and struggles in its growth. Religion is that which saves and preserves individuals, not necessarily in a salvific, Christian sense, but, possibly in a temporal, tangible way.

As Fosdick explains his notion of religion, he equates it with other elements of life which also share this quality of psychological savior. Art, philosophy, music - all these are, he says, experiences into which a psyche is immersed, and through which a psyche receives hope, power and peace. Real religion must offer those rewards; real religion must be the vehicle through which one's self is surrendered in belief that a higher good exists. Fosdick concludes that if "one's life means not grasping what the self can get but ***giving*** (Italics mine) to some worthy end what the self can expend, one has found an authentic religious experience."[47] Religion, he says, is concerned primarily not with formal creed and church, but with inner experience.[48]

It seems, then, that "religion," correctly defined, must be understood in this duality: "organized" religion and "psychological experience." And it can be seen that within neither of these descriptions is there a mention of "Christianity." That is because a thing or individual does not have to be "Christian" in order to be religious. One may be religious and be Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish; one may be a Moslem and be as religious as anyone else. But in order to be "Christian," one must adhere to the very essence of Jesus the Christ and embrace, as Fosdick says, "reverence for personality."[49] According to Fosdick, it is this

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[47] Ibid, p. 16.

[48] Ibid

[49] Ibid, p. 40.

reverence for personality, "the most valuable thing in the universe, revealing the real nature of Creative Power and the ultimate meaning of Creation,[50] that sets Christianity apart from mere religion or other organized religions." Writes Fosdick:

> "... Christ took up the cause of personality's preeminence. Like a true son of his time and people, he did not speak about it in abstract terms. He was concrete, picturesque, poetic, dramatic. He said that when one personality turned from spiritual failure to success, all the angels sang; that it was not the Father's will that one personality, even in a child, should perish; that quality of character was revealed primarily in the way we treated personality in others; but that to gain the whole world was unprofitable bargain if one failed in building personality within oneself."[51]

Clearly, Christianity requires religion - that inner, personal, psychological experience. Religion becomes Christianity only, however, when one thoroughly embraces and actively strives for this reverence of and for personality.

As those definitions are considered, one has to wonder the place of Christian dogma and doctrine in light of religion which is also Christian. We have already laid some stipulations for being a ***Christian:*** that one must believe in and profess and confess Jesus as the Son of God. That seems to be the most basic requirement one can ask. One might extend this definition and say that a Christian must believe in the teachings of Jesus, and, therefore, this seemingly critical and central issue of personality, or radical respect for and change in others' personalities and one's own personality, respectively. But does one need to believe in, or fully accept, the so-called "buttresses" of the Christian faith - i.e., its doctrines and dogma? Is real struggle allowed on those issues, defined by humans, as one seeks union and reconciliation with Jesus?

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[50] Ibid, p. 44.

[51] Ibid, p. 47.

Indeed, we would agree with Bishop Robinson, when he says that "... we must be aware of clinging to the Buttresses of Christianity, instead of to Christ."[52] Has organized religion insisted upon from its members things which they cannot accept, or which they at least need to question? Students queried for this document voiced great concern that while they might want to embrace Jesus, their doing so has been historically thwarted because their Bible classes have discouraged and frowned upon, their questioning of church dogma and doctrine.

That discouragement of questioning has been but one of the major weaknesses of organized religion, or, the Church. There has been an evolution of thought and practice which has placed the Church at odds with, or at least one of sync with, its very progenitor, Jesus. Robinson notes "... that Christianity should be equated in the public mind ... with organized religion merely shows how far we have departed from the New Testament."[53] He continues by saying that "the last thing the Church exists to be is an organization for the religious. Its charter is to be servant of the world."[54]

Again creeps up the notion of reverence for ***personality***; the foundation of Christianity. But somehow, it has often lost in the shuffle for organizational supremacy. Far more important is one's denomination, one's knowledge of the Methodist Discipline or the Roman Catholic catechism; more than modifying or improving one's ***personality*** as would have Jesus it is important to remain in one's denomination or go to hell. How much better it would be if, as Robinson notes:

> I would see much more hope for the Church if it was organized not to defend the interests of religion against the inroads of the state,

[52] Bishop, J.A. Robinson, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 140.
[53] Ibid, p. 134.
[54] Ibid.

> but to equip Christians, by the quality and power of its community life, to enter with their 'secret discipline' into all the exhilarating and dangerous, secular strivings of our day, there to follow and to find the workings of God."[55]

That ideal may have been lost for the most part because of the lack, within organized religion, of the personal, ***psychological*** religion or experience, which we previously described.

Why is there, or has there been, a dearth of the comforting, powerful, peaceful psychological thrust within organized religion? Clearly, there is no one answer, but the situation may be related to a number of different situations. One such situation could very well be religious intolerance. In the face of evolutionary doctrine and dogma there has existed an intolerance - for other denominations, for beliefs which might be slightly left of center of the accepted norm; for challenge and debate. For too long and for too many, Christ has been set totally against culture in such a way as to denigrate that culture and presuppose some superior religious mind-set in its place. What has evolved is an austere life-style, accompanied by an austere way of thinking, which has choked life from those who struggle to live! Niebuhr brings the historic of this problem in his discussion of Tertullian, one of the Church fathers. Niebuhr describes Tertullian as a "Christ against culture" type who is a "Trinitarian who understands that the God Who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ is the Creator and the Spirit also; but within that context he maintains the absolute authority of Jesus Christ."[56] In that acknowledgement of the Supremacy and sole-ruler ship of Jesus Tertullian:

> "... combines a rigorous morality of obedience to his commandments, including not only love of the brothers, but of his enemies, nonresistance to evil, prohibitions to anger and a lustful

[55] Ibid, p. 139.

[56] H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture

> look. He is as strict a Puritan in his interpretation of what Christian faith demands in conduct as one can find."[57]

Tertullian, like many present-day Christians, believed that sin resides in culture, and their reaction is to withdraw; when Tertullian "admonishes believers, his counsel is to withdraw from many meetings and occupations, not only because they are corrupted by their relation to pagan faith, but because they require a mode of life contrary to the spirit and law of Christ."[58] He rejects art, philosophy, politics - and is not unlike adherents to present-day Christian sects who reject art, music, theater, etc., as evidence of sin.

Such cultural intolerance seems not only trivial but non-Biblical; it seems to support Robinson's observation that Christians, within the confines of organized religion, have departed from the New Testament. Nowhere in the Gospel does it say that Jesus ***withdrew*** from culture. He remained squarely within it and through his presence, sought to transform it. He drank wine; he apparently liked parties (Wedding at Cana); he did not separate himself from undesirables, but, rather, went straight to them; (Good Samaritan; the Woman at the Well). So where is the ***Biblical*** justification for such separatism? Organized religion, or some organized religion, has somehow created "qualifications" of austerity, abstinence, cultural rejection - in order to be a "good" Christian, but, as Bonhoeffer notes, this is rather superfluous, for:

> To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism, but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.[59]

Coupled with such intolerance and cultural rejection, which has

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Robinson, p. 83.

accounted for some Christians rejecting Jesus and Christianity ***as it has been presented*** via organized religion has been the message of ***fear*** which has proliferated from Christian pulpits. Fosdick refers to austere religion of self-renunciation; an orthodoxy which was at once terrifying and comfortless. He writes:

> Men believe in a Calvinistic God who from all eternity had foredoomed multitudes of his children to eternal hell. Preachers drove women mad and made strong men cry out in terror by their pictures of God holding sinners over the infernal pit and likely at any moment to let go.[60]

Hell-fire and damnation preaching has literally frightened many would-be Christians away from Jesus and Christianity, even while, in its day, it was responsible for bringing hundreds into the Christian fold, albeit not the way Jesus would have done it. (Where is concern for the reverence of personality?) One of the greatest preachers in American history, Jonathan Edwards, was known for how he concentrated "on the predicament of the sinner, how dreadfully he dangles ***just before*** he plunges to eternal agony, and while he has time to repent and be saved."[61] On Edwards' sermons, Niebuhr notes:

> " ...[a]masterful portrait of the precariousness of life's poise ... the other in security of men and of mankind which are at every moment ... ready to plunge into the abyss of disintegration.[62]

Conrad Cherry, in his essay, "Imagery and Analysis: Jonathan Edwards on Revivals of Religion" noted that Edwards maintained the level of fear through the use of his homiletic imagery:

> Edwards made dramatic use of everyday images to convey this sense of life's uncertainty, an insect suspended over a fire by a

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[60] Fosdick, As I See Religion, pp. 103-104.

[61] Conrad Cherry, "Imagery and Analysis: Jonathan Edwards on Revivals of Religion" in Jonathan Edwards: His Life and Influence. Charles Angoff, ed. (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975), p. 22.

[62] Ibid., p. 23.

> slender thread, men walking on a rotten covering stretched over a deep pit, a rock hurled toward a delicate spider's web ... Yet Edwards always maintained that the state of dread was but a prelude to another state, the state of salvation.[63]

Thus, preachers used fear to guide listeners toward salvation. The result was a crying out, "Lord, Lord what must I do to be saved?" but not from an internal wish for peace, power and hope as much as it was to be spared the plunge into the depths of hell. Fosdick remembers personally when as a boy, "fear haunted the sanctuary," when he as a seven-year-old boy cried himself to sleep because he was afraid of going to hell.[64] That fear, or gospel of fear, was not easily abandoned, nor has it been. Remember the South Korean theologian, Ms. Chun, who saw God as "mean, old white man," who was going to send her to hell because she had engaged in ancestor worship. Or consider an expression of fear many pastors must hear - that people are afraid to be in church because they're still sinners? A young woman came to this writer, terrified, because she still "slips up from time to time" and takes drugs. She was devastated with a sense of personal failure, but also consumed with a sense of fear that an angry God would consider her bad, and a hypocrite, for coming to church with such sin stains on her soul. It was because of this fear that she had stayed away from church so long; her fear threatened to pull her away from God and the church yet again.

Fosdick says that in response to the image of God (and therefore, Jesus) being negative as it evolved from this bed of fear, there has been a subsequent "creation" of God, Jesus and religion which likewise is not accurate. It has already been stated that some people, primarily African Americans in this

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Fosdick, As I See Religion, p. 104.

country, have rejected Jesus on the belief that he is a weak person. The Gospel of reconciliation, of humans reconciled to each other and to God through forgiveness, love, patience, humility, meekness - all that was rejected by and is still problematic to, a great number of African Americans. To a people who have been oppressed by manipulation of the Biblical texts, being encouraged to deny and sublimate the most base human desire for dignity and equality, this Gospel was and is repugnant.

The problem is as much there result of a backlash and reaction to the "fear theology" just described as it is one of overt scriptural manipulation. Fosdick writes that against the "reign of terror" pushed by Jonathan Edwards, et. al., come a restructuring of organized religion:

> Judgment Day was allegorized; hell was sublimated; predestination was denied; God was sentimentalized. Whatever was harsh, grim, forbidding in the old religion was crowded to the periphery or thrust out altogether ... Religion became a song about the ideal life, the love of God, the hope of heaven.[65]

Fosdick concludes that "stern fact" is being "sugarcoated", and for those who remember the days of fear, such religion may be soothing. But it is not realistic nor is it a source of strength to people who have to sort through generations of pain and disenchantment to find God. They are not comforted by the fear or the saccharine; they look for the Jesus who sympathizes with their condition and who confirms their sneaking suspicion that he does not tolerate oppression and in fact urges active movement against it. Hurting people can seek ways of reconciliation only after their God has recognized the source of their hurt and refuses to criticize them for their feelings.

In closing this chapter, we need to address one final problem of

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[65] Ibid., p. 104.

organized religion, and how it may have created some problems in the creation or maintenance of a good perception of Jesus - and that problem is organized religions notion of the "transcendence" of God, especially as it relates to supernaturalism. God has been presented to most of us, as an "up there" or "out there" spirit. His distance has been necessary, presumably, because of his divinity. Actually, for this writer, being a part of the Black Church actually lessened the reality or even sensitivity to, a "Transcendent" God. God was real because Jesus, presented in a very immanent way, was real. The God of the Old Testament stood high on a mountain or behind a cloud, but Jesus, the man, was as near as the next seat. And, since, Jesus was and is believed to be the Son of God, and the way to the Father, God, subsequently did not seem far off at all.

Not so, however, is the general feeling when it comes to God. God, apparently, the "Man Upstairs," has been way too far away from his children to relate; Robinson coins what seems to be a general feeling about God: "For if God is 'above it all, he cannot really be involved."[66] And for so long, that has presumably been the prevalent belief. Robinson writes that, "... certainly, up to the Second World War, the commonest vision of Jesus was not as a human being at all. He was a god in human form, full of supernatural knowledge and miraculous power."[67] It seems that "God, as he was popularly imagined, inhabited the supernatural. He made himself real ... by supernatural invasions of the world. When, therefore, the supernatural dwindled, God seemed to dwindle."[68]

It seems that a vast majority of Christians have had to cling to the

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[66] J. A. Robinson, Honest to God, p. 46.

[67] Ibid, p. 66.

[68] Fosdick, Dear Mr. Brown, p. 49.

supernatural in order to keep God alive. It is not unlike the mystery which used to surround the Roman Catholic mass; the usage of Latin helped ***justify*** the mysteries which were and are inexplicable. It does no good, apparently, for God's ways to be too close to his subjects; the question is, what good is done those same subjects if God is too far away?

Organized religion has clung desperately to the supernatural as a way to keep God alive, even at the expense of opposing advances in the fields of astronomy, geology, physics, chemistry and biology. Organized religion's refusal to let go of supernatural ideas may very well have stifled some individuals as this world grew from infant to child to young adult to adulthood. It (the Church) was afraid that in the face of increasing knowledge, God was being crowded out! So of course, religion would uphold a John Jasper in his declaration that "The Sun Do Move" in his classic sermon; of course, it would condemn as a heretic Galileo as he reluctantly revealed scientific information about the universe which was clearly beyond the realm of supernatural definition. Instead of science being seen as an extension, or an explanation of, God's creative genius, science has been seen as an antagonist to God. Instead of the religious being filled with awe at how God, inexplicably, created such perfect order and harmony out of nothing, the religious were anguished at the human uncovering of his divine genius. Religion actually supposed its human definitions and explanations superior to divine reality. As an example, the doctrine and reality of the Incarnation has caused a flurry of thought. People sought, with human capabilities, to explain the divine phenomenon of how Jesus managed to have a human ***and*** divine nature:

> To use an analogy, if one had to present the doctrine of the person of Christ as a union of oil and water, then it made the best attempt to do so. In fact, popular supernaturalistic (sic) Christology has

> always been dominantly docetic; that is to say, Christ only appeared to be a man or looked like a man; underneath, he was God.[69]

The point is, in maintaining a supernatural theology, "the religious" have not succeeded in explaining what they seek to explain, nor have they allowed God to be close enough to them to reveal ***his*** answers to things divine. And Jesus, who in this process has been shuttled back and forth between humanity and divinity, may very well have lost some of his mediatory power for the average Christian. Can there be comfort for someone who is confused about who Jesus is? Can he or she, in light of supernatural theology, reach the "Man Upstairs?" Truly, it is more comforting, spiritually, to abandon this Greek, dialectical way of thinking and just to accept that the world, in all its complexity and mystery, is a master example of divine creation and unity. To quote Fosdick:

> This is one world, a spiritual system throughout, where we never get what we want until we fulfill the conditions for getting it. If we want physical results we must fulfill physical conditions. That is the real world we live in, and it is both stern and magnificent.[70]

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[69] Robinson, p. 65.

[70] Fosdick, Dear Mr. Brown, p. 53.

CHAPTER 5

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

"There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither bond nor free
there is neither male nor female;
for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."
(Gal. 3:28,KJV)

In the course of talking to people, via Bible classes, for this paper, it was not surprising that disenchantment with both Jesus and Christianity was heard from members of so-called "marginal" groups of American society - women and African Americans. There exists not only disenchantment, but also anger at the religion and the person for whom and on whom the religion is named and based. Some answers or opinions on Jesus were expected, e.g., that Jesus, in his "weak" state is responsible for preachers picking up on that quality of his personality and using it to keep women and ethnic minorities "in their place." Many students admitted that, in their disappointment over their perceptions of Jesus and his church, they had stayed away from church and do not accept Jesus to this day. When asked if they ***wanted*** a better perception of Jesus, the answer was almost unanimously "yes"; only one student, an African American male, said he would probably never change his negative opinion of Jesus.

In the classes conducted to gauge perceptions of Jesus and to get ideas for how a manual for teaching Jesus should be constructed, students were encouraged to question and to challenge what they had traditionally believed about Jesus. At first, there was a real reluctance to do so. "I've always been

taught that it's wrong to question God, or express anger to him or about him," offered one student, " and I don't care what you say, I'm still scared I'll go to hell if I say too much." That feeling of fear and apprehension seemed to typical of most of the students.

But they were encouraged to question and challenge nonetheless, not as a way of damaging their relationship to God, but as a way of enhancing it and living in righteousness, i.e., "right", or vertical, God-human relationship. It was against that backdrop that the probing began, and it was from "the disinherited," i.e., the African Americans and the women, that the anger and the pain spewed.

"I am angry, "said one woman, "that Christianity has allowed me and allowed us as a people to believe we're inferior." Her comment was significant, in that she had been out of church for 35 years and had never taken her daughter, now 24. The image of Jesus was not, or had not been, a source of comfort to her; rather, he was the progenitor of a race of hate-filled people who hypocritically claimed to be religious.

An African American male voiced the same disenchantment, and more. He began re-attending church only this year, after being unable to embrace either Jesus' image or ethics. His concern was for his children; "I don't want them growing up believing they can only feel good when they die, " he said. The image of Jesus as waiting "on the other side of the Jordan" was completely disgusting to him. "If we can experience hell here on earth - which we do, " he said, "then Jesus ought to be able to let us experience glory here, too." Prodded, a class of 40 African Americans agreed that they all had difficulty accepting the person of Jesus.[71]

[71] Interestingly, a group of white students also said they had problems accepting Jesus, the admitted reason being "he was too effeminate." They had problems believing, for example, that Jesus ever got angry.

"I have problems because he's so white," said one young woman, "and as I read the Bible and understood - or ***thought*** I understood - what part of the world he came from, I could not accept the image." She went on to say how her grandmother "still has a picture of a white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus" hanging in her home, "and you can't tell her that that's not what he looked like," she said.

Many students voiced disappointment that Jesus' racial image had not been done away with, or had at least not been addressed, from the pulpit. Whatever had been the legacy of the Black church, that legacy had all but disappeared from pulpits in which stood preachers more concerned with profit than with proclamation. For the most part, these students had not been empowered by the message of Jesus, but conversely, historically weakened and oppressed.

If the racial concerns over the way Jesus has been presented were disturbing, so were the sexual ones. This writer, although a female had never thought deeply about some of the concerns raised; Jesus was a man, for example, because he was born a boy. Therefore, the Son of God being male was not particularly problematic.

But for some women that was not the case. Indeed, the fact that Jesus' maleness has 1) been used as justification for male dominance over females, and 2) has led to the unspoken belief that in order to be divine, one must be male, has caused no small rumbling among female Christians. "I want to hold onto Christianity because my grandmother did, and she was ***so strong*** spiritually," offered on student, "but I have lots of problems with Jesus." She went on to voice disappointment at his apparent lack of sexuality: "How could

he have been a man - truly man - and been asexual?" she asked. "Was he gay?" His "sexlessness" had sent out the message that sex was bad - so bad that Jesus had to be born without intercourse and could not, would not, have sex as an adult male. "It has made women believe that if they like sex, or want sex, then they're less than holy, because Jesus' own ***mama*** didn't have it," she said, adding that the issue had caused many problems in the area of sexuality for men ***and*** women.

Another student voiced disappointment that the Bible was used as justification to oppress women. Because she so closely associated the Bible with Jesus, she had been equating Jesus with gender oppression and discrimination for years. As the class progressed, she (and the other students) were reminded that the so-called "Haustafeln"[72] codes in the epistles were not given by Jesus. The class was taken through a history of the canonization process of the Bible, and distinctions were made between what Jesus said and what was said of what he said. Only through that process was some of this particular student's disenchantment ameliorated.

Clearly, there is much disenchantment, disappointment and some outright ***dislike*** for Jesus by women and minorities, based on Biblical interpretation as well as cultural bias. It is this source of poor popular perceptions of Jesus that we now turn our attention.

Jesus, The Bible, and Women

According to scholars, there have been ebbs and tides in the treatment and involvement of women in the Christian church. Although we may be

[72] See Clarice Martin's "The Haustafeln" (Household Codes) in African American Biblical. Interpretation: 'Free Slaves' and 'Subordinate Women' in Stony The Road We Trod, Cain Hope Felder, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p. 206.

inclined to believe that today's feminist movement is unique, women as far back as the first century A.D. had a voice and a presence which was respected. But equally as "present" was the institution, the developing institution, of the organized church, which, as it strove for ecclesiastical stability, respectability and social assimilation, felt threatened by the female voice and spirit.[73] Bowden notes that "a significant characteristic of the Synoptic Jesus...is his openness toward women,"[74] this against a backdrop of post-Jesus writings which relegated women to their "proper place" within a male-dominated, patriarchal society. Women were urged to "be silent," "be submissive," and were said to be the progenitors of sin in the world, after Jesus came to and left the earth. Their lesser status had already. been firmly set from Old Testament, Jewish Scriptures, so much so that Jesus' "openness" to them, attested to by Bowden above, was a revolutionary act. Jesus talked with and ministered to women, and by so doing, suggested their parity in society with men. Even in the earliest days of the church:

> ...women still have a prominent role. The Christian churches offered their members a place in communities in which men and women were in some respects on equal footing. We find women mentioned as the leaders of house churches, and they also play a major role in the life and worship of the church. [75]

But, Bowden notes, when the church became concerned with maintaining (or establishing) its respectability in the society, "women" sank to a subordinate and inferior role: they were expected to be very much in the background." Within less than a century, he continues, the "Synoptic Gospels had been domesticated," and there was " already a manifest conflict between

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[73] John Bowden, Jesus: The Unanswered Questions, p. 48.

[74] Ibid

[75] Ibid

what the Synoptic Jesus had said and what the church put into practice."[76]

That setback, however, didn't keep women forever silent, although serious damage was wrought to the new freedom of all of which Jesus had taught. Still, his message, in action as well as speech, of the unity, oneness, between God's creatures, burned in the hearts of women, and time and time again, throughout history, they changed and pushed their way to the front. In the 12th century and onwards, there were religious feminist movements - movements which continued down to the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages there was a cessation, for a while, of this forward thrust, as the 'Age of Faith' really lived up to nothing more than being an "Age of Doubt." If women had been propelled by a faith which said they were within the bounds of Christological dogma before the Middle Ages, during the Middle Ages, when ***everything*** was questioned, so too was their faith, and "woman" again slipped to a clearly subordinate position.

But it was not Jesus' fault. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus reached out to the disinherited: the tax collectors, the Gentiles, the children and the women. Lisa Sergio notes that "almost every time Jesus broke new ground in his ministry, a woman was cast in a primary role at his side,"[77] and she says it was Jesus, while on earth, who "perceived the need for a partnership of male and female minds at the helm of society."[78] Although not ever excused from their so-called "traditional" role of housekeeper and mother, women were seen by Jesus and being capable of tradition and revolution: i.e., they could also be allowed to express their spiritual needs and capabilities. Therefore,for

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[76] Ibid, p. 49.

[77] Lisa Sergio, Jesus and Woman: An exciting discovery of what he offered her (McLean, Va: EPM Publications, Inc.) p. 2.

[78] Ibid, p. 5.

example, in the story of Mary and Martha, there emerged the possibility that the quiet, subservient Mary was ***not*** the prototypical woman, but that the ideal woman was both meditative and silent ***and*** aggressive and able to express herself. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel observes that in 1300, Meister Eckhart preached Luke's story of Mary and Martha (Luke. 10:30-42). He "praised the mature Martha and criticized Mary because she was not ready."[79] She continues:

> In so doing, he stood traditional interpretation on its head. Up to that point, in traditional commentaries, Martha was the negative, the weaker image, compared with the perfect symbol of Mary. She was the image of the Jewish church in comparison with the church of Christ; the image of the imperfect earthly church in comparison with the heavenly church; the image of the active life in comparison to the contemplative life. In comparison with the lofty spiritual claims of the church, she bore the burdens of transitoriness and earthiness. In herself, Martha was nothing. Martha had to be overcome.[80]

What was such a model of spiritual perfection preached around this model of the quiet, "in-her-place" woman, Mary, to do to women who were (and who are!) her opposite? What was the subliminal message being given about ***whom Jesus*** preferred? And if one did not fit this image, was one cast out of the reach of grace and salvation? After all, Jesus admonished Martha. He praised Mary. For smug preachers with the agenda of keeping the patriarchal social system intact, the message was clear.

But then, there came the Gospel of John, who in his eleventh chapter, told the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, Jesus' friend, who had died. Clearly, Martha and Mary believed in Jesus as the Son of God; presumably,

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[79] Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, The Women Around Jesus (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), p. 28.

[80] Ibid.

they accepted his divinity fully. Which is why they were angry at Jesus for having arrived in Bethlehem so late. Lazarus had been sick, but he, as well as his sisters, had called for Jesus. Jesus took too long to get there; Lazarus died, and Martha was furious. The accepted behavior of a woman would have been to stifle her anger, but Martha could not. She met Jesus as he entered the city, and in her anger, said that had he been earlier, Lazarus would not have died. There was no softness about her encounter with Jesus; she felt free enough to look him in the eye and, in effect, ***chastise*** him for disappointing her. Mary likewise voiced disappointment, but she probably bowed her head as she wept. Not so Martha. No tears fell. She was bold enough to stand on her faith and demand comfort in the midst of grief. She even shows a little impertinence; Jesus asks where Lazarus is, and Martha almost smirks. "It's been four days! You cannot see him now. He already stinks..." So Martha speaks to THE MASTER, and tradition would have had her properly handled.

But John lets us know that God created both male and female with the capacity for great faith,and he lets us know that both male and female are allowed to come to that faith through legitimate spiritual struggle - ***which isn't always silent and gentle***. Jesus does not cast Martha away; he meets her where she is, and says to her, "Your brother will rise," to which Martha responds by exclaiming her faith: "I know he will rise again on the last day, and at the general resurrection, he will return to life." And then Jesus blesses her. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And he who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe that?" when she says she does, she confesses to him her belief that he is the Christ.[81]

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[81] John 11:1-44.

What an exhilarating story and affirmation as to Jesus' ability to interact with, bless and keep women, even if they don't fit the traditional, silent role. Martha's encounter with Jesus, as recorded by John, gives support to the belief that Jesus really was 'no respecter' or persons, and that not even he required a woman to be silent and unfulfilled when she desired spiritual growth! John's gospel allows women who are more aggressive and less docile as well as the traditional 'Mary's" to believe that prevenient grace and salvation can reach them, too!

Perhaps, before the intrusion of Western editors and redactors into the Scriptures, there were even more of these types of Jesus female encounters. Surely, it is a possibility. As Ben Witerington III notes:

> The effects of Jesus' teachings and attitudes also appear in Luke's second volume as well as in his Gospel. Luke especially seems determined to drive home his point about the equal place and new roles of women in the community of Jesus by utilizing the techniques of male-female parallelism...
> Further, there is evidence that Luke's message was all too clear, for the Western text of Acts recognized the implications of these narratives and attempted to tone down the language in them which spoke of women's new freedom and roles in the Christian community.[82]

Surely, if the Scriptures did contain too many ***obviously*** empowering, freedom-giving Scriptures as pertain to women, the Church would have lost some of its footing on ground it did not intend to lose. It is not difficult to imagine that in the case of Biblical inclusion and treatment of women, not a small amount of "selective editing" has occurred.

This last statement is at least a partial answer to a question posed by Lisa Sergio in her book, Jesus and Woman. She acknowledges that in his

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[82] Ben Witerington, III, Women in the Ministry of Jesus. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 129.

earthly ministry, Jesus did much to show allegiance to and respect for woman. " Since Jesus went so far as to liberate the women of his circle from subjugation , treating them as disciples, why did he not give them a part in the mission to be carried on after his death?"[83]

It's not certain that he did not give them a part. Sergio says that women were not included in the Great Commission directly, but indirectly. It was in each woman's encounter with Jesus that she was given her role, post-resurrection. Sergio continues by saying that Jesus determined that woman's role was to be one of "inreach" while the men were assigned "outreach": woman were told (privately, of course!) to "build those moral and social foundations which must lie at the heart of each and every person if human society is to stand secure."[84] Sergio finally concludes that women were not touched by tongues of fire, and therefore "did not receive the gift of tongues" on Pentecost because "they did not need to have at their command a sophisticated means of mass communication. Their need was for an inner light by which to see their inner selves."[85]

Sergio's comments and conclusions are irritatingly sexist. First of all, given the fact that editing of Biblical texts went on, not only during translations but probably even during the canonization process, it is not at all a given that certain things may have been said to women as to their "outreach" role that were edited out. It is not at all a given that original texts did not include mention that the tongues of fire touched women also. Such inclusion would be in keeping with Jesus' message of the agape love of the Father being extended to all; such exclusion in the written texts would be in keeping with the needs of a

[83] Jesus and Woman, p. 5.

[84] Ibid, p. 6.

[85] Ibid.

developing church in a patriarchal society wanting to keep its power and control intact.

But going even further, Sergio's observations of feminine "inreach" versus masculine "outreach" sounds like what any paternalistic, male or female Christian would say about the 'roles' of women and men and the different, sex-based capabilities of each. Her comments are no less damaging than the prevalent belief that women ought to be missionaries and teachers, while men hold up the fort as pastors and preachers. It seems that in coming to her conclusions, Sergio is bound by a "literalist" view of Biblical interpretation that seeks to justify the unjustifiable within the sacred texts. This writer prefers a historical approach, allowing for error and adjustments in the text to fit certain social, cultural, political and economic needs.

Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel might agree. She asks:

> Are there perhaps parts of the Gospels, or even parts of the New Testament, which were written by women? At least the most important tradition, i.e., those of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, go back to women, because they were the only followers of Jesus who were there at the time. The great scholar Adolf von Harnack. conjectured that a woman, Priscilla,wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. Later books, which were not included in the Bible, at least have women as their subjects (Thecia; Mary Magdalene) and have preserved voices and sayings of which we would otherwise be ignorant.[86]

It cannot be forgotten that, even as the Bible is a theocentric text, it is also a text which has been used to stabilize governments and uphold existing systems of order. Moltmann-Wendel says it has been "hostile to women, and has given form to a history of [a] tradition which has made a deep mark on human consciousness."[87] For centuries, she says, the Bible has been used to keep

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[86] The Women Around Jesus, p. 5.

[87] Ibid, p. 7.

women under control; it "served to keep women at home."[88] Now, she says, "it has fallen into the hands of the powerless and the question is what does it have to say to them? For those who experience God as a power for order can always misuse the Bible to secure their ends."[89]

It is probably optimistic for Moltmann-Wendel to believe, if she truly does, that the Bible, having "now" fallen into the hands of the powerless, will result in too dramatic a change in those people. The chains of an oppressive existence are extremely difficult to break, and, because of the long-standing tradition of Biblical justification for oppression, there seems to be an ever-present fear that perhaps God did ordain this pain and confusion. It is a f act, as Clarice Martin writes in her essay on the "Haustafeln"[90] that African Americans, or the Black church, as a rule has attempted to reject at least one part of the Haustafeln - that part which directs obedience of slaves to their masters But the picture is not quite so rosy as it may seem. No matter how glorious or powerful the Exodus story, and no matter how content the liberation preaching of some pastors, there still remains a large segment of the African American community who cannot quite forget the Biblical directives concerning slaves and masters. Part of that reluctance may be due to a tendency on the part of this deeply-religious people, to believe that God himself wrote the Bible, and therefore, one must obey it all. Yes, God parted the Red Sea, the reasoning might go, and yes, he allowed the slaves to be free. But he also told slaves to be obedient and for women to be silent, submissive, and dutiful. So while African American women may want to believe that they don't have to pay attention to the words of, say, Ephesians

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[88] Ibid, p. 9.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Martin maintains that the relational imperatives found in Col. 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:21-26, 29; and I Peter 2:18-3:7, are all part of the "Haustafeln" or household codes, which are and have been problematic to women and African Americans.

5:21-26; 29, they cannot quite rid themselves of the fear and suspicion that to do so would put them in sin and in danger of being cast into hell.

It is at this point that Clarice Martin and myself would take issue, for she assets that African Americans have been successful in rejecting the Haustafeln as regards racism but in relation to sexism, writes Martin:

> One vexing question remains before us. Why is the African American interpretive tradition marked by a forceful critique and rejection of a literalist interpretation of the slave regulations in the Haustafeln, but not marked by an equally passionate critique and rejection of a literalist interpretation regarding the subordination of women to men in the Haustafeln?[91]

Perhaps the inability of too many African Americans to let go of that nagging fear accounts for the dearth of liberation hermeneutics heard from African American pulpits, as complained about by some of the students queried for this paper. Or perhaps it accounts for the feeling of a young African American male, a member of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois, a church where the pastor, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr., consistently and persistently, preaches the liberation message of the Gospel. This young man, dark-skinned in color and a member of Trinity since a youth, lamented to Dr. Wright that, still, he didn't like being Black. Theologically as well as historically, it has been taught that Blacks are worthy of enslavement. Theologically and historically, it has been taught that women are worthy of subjugation. Alicia Craig Faxon writes that, "Unfortunately, in the history of the Christian church, women have been assigned a secondary role. Such influential theologians as Augustine and Aquinas presented women as a sexual snare and as being inferior to man. Aquinas went so far as to define women as defective males"[92] and many women

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[91] Clarice Martin, "The Haustafeln," p. 225.

[92] Alicia Craig Faxon, Women and Jesus (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1973), p. 102.

still believe the worst about themselves. Unfortunately, the Bible being in the hands of the powerful or powerless, that theological history will be hard to overcome. But if at least some women are to progress from victim to victor, the teaching done to them must concentrate on the unifying, powerful message contained in the words and person of Jesus.

Jesus, the Bible, and African Americans

Certainly, nobody can or will deny the influence Jesus and the Bible have had on African Americans, historically. The African American Christian's ability to grasp the narratives of the Hebrew Bible in which the God of Israel was a deliverer from oppression became the mainstay of his/her religion. With the inclusion of Jesus as the righteous 'Suffering Servant' who endured unjustified pain for a more glorious end, post-death, the religion of the African American was complete. There was a God, "up there" somewhere, who had once freed the Israelites through Moses, and there was a Jesus who came "down here" to assume this suffering on his back, so that they might all be able to rejoice in Beulah Land. Certainly, this paradigm for religion functioned successfully in giving African Americans the courage they needed to pass from slavery to freedom. In this sense, the religion of African Americans in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries was that "psychological experience" referred to earlier by Harry Emerson Fosdick, surrounded by a deep faith in Jesus as the means by which suffering would be converted to glory and victory. In this way, the Christianity for African Americans held its power on two levels; one level made them reach back in theological history for the affirmation of God's presence in the world, and the other level produced for them an "other-worldly"

vision which allowed them to escape temporal reality by projecting themselves into a spiritual promise. Songs like, "Soon ah will be done a wid de troubles of de wurl" ... spoke of that hope for relief, and that sentiment has carried over into more modern songs, like "Goin Up Yonder" or "I'll Fly Away." The message is and has been clear: endure the suffering now and in so doing win your crown.

That ethos worked well for a people in the throes of a physical slavery no one could deny. Black religion as we know it today was born in this particular and specific delivery room, but as the physical condition of African Americans changed and the people "grew" from being strangers in a strange land to part developers and owners of that land, one has to ask the question, "Did their religion grow with them?" Should it have? Can what Albert Raboteau calls "slave religion" really be effective today? Where was Jesus in that historical religion, and where is he today?

Justification for even asking the questions has to come from the lips and hearts of those most affected - present-day African Americans, and to be sure, many have problems with Jesus in that they have been taught to "wait on the Lord" for a better life. Present-day African Americans do not want to wait, any more than their Anglo brothers and sisters have had to wait. In fact, they note that Anglos have ***used*** God and Jesus to justify their quests for freedom, dignity, and self-preservation, while African Americans have been dissuaded from doing the same.

Anglos, from the beginning of this country, have called upon God to help them and strengthen them in their quest for self-determination. God the Creator was called upon to be God the Warrior, as he was in the Old Testament, leading the faithful to battle against formidable foes. Alexis de Tocqueville properly

noted that "there is not a single religious doctrine ... which is hostile to democratic and political institutions."[93] He writes that:

> Religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society should ... be considered as the first of their political institutions...
> For the Americans, the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other ...[94]

Thus, Anglo-Americans conceived of political systems as being supported by God, and God was to be freely called upon to help devise and develop those systems. The idea that church and state are therefore complete and separate of the other is fairly ludicrous. It was on the basis of the belief that there was a God who had "created all men equal" that the American Constitution was born. American democracy was not merely to be a political system, it was to be a political system ***ordained by God himself***. God, the author of the quintessential "Bill of Rights", the Ten Commandments, would surely ordain the "certain inalienable rights" of, specifically, men - including "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As God had ordained it, then God must be called upon to insure that it was a reality, therefore, the American Revolutionary War was as much a religious war as it was a political one. The aftermath of that war was "harmony" between church and state; they walked hand in hand, though the church was to define its own empire to rule! But in that harmony, there was not, nor is there now, a reticence about or reluctance to, call upon God for assistance in the seeking of "certain inalienable rights." Consider this prayer, offered by a clergyman on behalf of some Poles seeking arms and money in order to fight for freedom:

> Almighty God! Lord of Hosts! Thou who didst strengthen the

[93] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, p. 289.

[94] Ibid, pp. 292-293.

> hearts and guide the arms of our fathers when they fought for the sacred rights of their national independence! Thou who didst make them triumph over a hateful oppression and didst grant to our people the blessings of peace and liberty, look with favor, Lord, upon the other hemisphere; have pity upon a heroic people fighting now as we fought for the defense of these same rights! Lord, who hast created all men in the same image, do not allow despotism to deform Thy work and maintain inequality upon the earth ... God Almighty, hear our supplications and save the Poles ... in the name of Thy beloved son, Jesus ...[95]

God, through Jesus, was to be the divine General, so to speak, as he had been for the Americans and for the Israelites. God was, after all, the author of equality, justice, mercy and brotherhood; God was the divine Teacher who had given all moral precepts for life on earth, and who had inspired the words, "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) God had sent his son Jesus to show the people that all laws were not to be followed because of their basic ***injustice***. God inspired Thomas Jefferson to utter some of the most brilliant and exhilarating words found in the Constitution, and to proclaim, "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time."[96] Gilbert notes that in all events, Christ's teachings were believed to be needed to be upheld. He writes that the "Declaration of Independence and Constitution recognize that the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle men to certain inalienable rights ... [and] when man-made laws cross the laws of nature and nature's God in a way to deprive the individual of God-given rights, then the man-made laws must be set aside, declared invalid."[97]

Clearly, then, on the part of Anglos there was a theocentricity and christocentricity in their thinking and motivation, accompanied by a fervor which

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[95] Ibid, pp. 289-90.

[96] Dan Gilbert, The Biblical Basis of the Constitution. (San Diego: The Danielle Publishers, 1936), p. 44.

[97] Ibid. p. 57.

undoubtedly would have been picked up by all who were within freedom's contagious environment.

African Americans, then, were in a position to embrace a God and a Jesus of freedom and justice, except that, that God and Jesus were not presented to them. In fact, conversion of, or concern for the conversion of, slaves to Christianity, was looked upon as justification for their enslavement![98] There was a very real schizophrenia in Anglo-American thought and policy: freedom was God-given to ***men***. Men were easily definable as Anglo-born. Any other ethnic person was sub-human, and therefore not entitled to those "certain inalienable rights."

Here, then, we had a race and a class of people being made into Americans by virtue of having been taken from their land, but being taught that the God who had ordained revolt from unjust oppression from English rulers and, therefore, freedom, would not ordain that same tenacity and determination to escape from unjust oppression from Christian whites ***because they weren't humans***! Slave-holders recognized their dilemma; they realized that their God and their Jesus, who had propelled their ancestors to insurrection against an unjust government, ***could*** do the same for their slaves, and at the moment of that realization, justice and Christianity parted company. At that point, a shift in the Christological hermeneutic occurred, from a God and Jesus who ordained justice ***now*** to a God and Jesus who wanted slaves to wait until their resurrection experience for justice. Slave-holders recognized that there was a danger implicit in the Christian message, a very basic egalitarianism. Therefore, the Gospel of Jesus was attended to very tenderly, in deference for

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[98] Albert Raboteau, Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 96.

the epistles of Paul, especially the Haustafeln. Instead of allowing the Gospel to be the means through which slaves understood their basic right of freedom, the Gospel was presented by clergy as an "attractive means for slave control."[99]

Raboteau makes an observation which is probably necessary to mention. The tendency, in reviewing the course of Christian thought given to slaves, is to soundly criticize organized religion and its clergy for presenting an inaccurate theology and Christology to the salves, but Raboteau makes it clear that clergy - even if from a paternalistic, patriarchal standpoint - ***did*** try to teach both slaves and slave-holders. It seems that there were a few problems which hindered the effort. One was a shortage of clergy; they could not reach either slaves or their owners on a regular basis, so even though some clergy were genuinely appalled at the disparity between what Christianity ***was*** and what it ***had become***, they were, numerically, in no position to correct the problem. Raboteau notes that in Virginia, "in 1701, nearly half to forty-six parishes containing 40,000 people, were unsupplied with clergy."[100] The dearth of clergy led to a second problem, identified by Raboteau: the need for clergy to depend on local vestry, controlled by the planter class not only for their living but for approval of their catechizes focus. If, then, the clergyman was too hell-bent on delivering the Good News in such a way as to have had it convict ***both*** slave-holders and slaves, the local vestry could and did, simply dismiss said clergyman. The issue of too few clergymen and therefore unchurched Anglos is a critical one, as it might have been different had more slave-holders been able - or willing - to hear and meditate on, the dictates of Jesus. Not only did slave-holders not give clergymen permission to baptize their slaves, because they felt

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[99] Winthrop Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812. (Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1968), p. 191.

[100] Raboteau, op. cit. p. 104.

it made it necessary for them to free them,[101] slave-holders refused to hear those parts of the New Testament which would have reminded them of the justice of God. Raboteau says that the "Christian commission to preach the Gospel to all nations ran directly counter to the economic interest of the Christian slave-owner."[102] There was, apparently, a push, an urgency, on the part of clergy, to get slave-holders to understand the need for their slaves to receive Jesus' message; in 1724, a proposal in Virginia actually offered slave-holders a tax break for baptizing their slaves.[103] Perhaps the thrust should have been to bring 'religion' into the hearts of the slave-holders; the catechizes of the slaves might then have taken care of itself.

In the meantime, it was the African Americans who were being lost in the shuffle, and it is to its credit as a race, that despite the odds, a Christology and theology was evolving and emerging, which was salvific. It was as though they understood that the Anglos fervently believed that it was God who gave people the right of freedom. They listened cryptically to the admonitions of the Haustafeln, but they also listened, as they sat in white churches, to the words of Jesus. Renita Weems posits, as she confirms that much of what African Americans learned of Jesus had to be aural, as well as oral,[104] that a people interpret what they hear and see and read through the confines of their own experience. What the slaves were ***hearing*** was an interpretation of Jesus which came from the reading of the text by members of the ruling class. They were exerting their own political, socioeconomic views upon the sacred text. What the slaves were ***receiving*** was an interpretation of ***that*** interpretation,

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[101] Ibid, p. 98.

[102] Ibid

[103] Ibid, p. 107.

[104] Renita J. Weems, "African American Women and the Bible," in Cain Hope Felder, ed., Stony the Road We Trod (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991)

one which gave a sense of purpose and direction to themselves. So, God was a liberator of slaves, "just like us." And Jesus, because he was a human ***and*** a god, too, was a friend who wasn't far, but who was quite near, ready to strengthen and give courage to, his believers. As far as the slaves could see (or hear), Jesus didn't know anything about them "not being human," as the white folks said. And Jesus suffered, too, only, the suffering didn't beat him. The white folks talked about the Resurrection and how Jesus stepped right on up to heaven where there was no suffering, only victory. So then in their ***hearing*** about Jesus, they made a Christological contract which pulled them, in time, from slavery; i.e., they were enslaved physically, but mentally, they were experiencing real freedom. And they could endure the suffering, because they would soon be rewarded, just like Jesus.

That theology worked for the slaves, and for subsequent generations of African Americans who found great empowerment within it. But present-day African Americans, at least some of the youth, are not impressed with that theology, nor do they adhere to it. "If Jesus' message means I have to want for good things, wait until I die to feel better, than I don't want him", offered one young man. In short, he is, as are not a few other African Americans, discontent with this classic, eighteenth century interpretation of Jesus; and, it would be convenient to stop there, but mention must be made that not all (nor can it even be said, most) African Americans are discontent with the preslavery and slavery, eighteenth century Jesus-views. As classes were held for this paper, it became apparent that some African Americans have ***no*** problem with the notion of a "way over Jordan" theology that says it's okay to suffer now and expect glory later. And it is fair to say, that while many African Americans are interested, at

least, in using historical-critical methods of biblical study to understand in a new way the Haustafeln, for example, many other African Americans are incensed and deeply bothered at any effort to disturb the sacred text. While some African Americans want "new biblical eyes," other feel more content to leave things as they are and to try to do as the good Lord says. A personal prejudice remorse that this mind-set reflects the thoroughness of early Christian teaching of African Americans by Anglos; a personal fear is that such a mind-set is still a dangerous tool in the hands of any group or individual which may use it for control.

It need also be said that not till such manipulation or control of the African-American religious mind comes from Anglo-Christians; in fact, many in the classes conducted for the paper complained of having been manipulated by African American clergy. "I heard Jesus often enough in my other church," rued one woman, "but it seemed like all we were being told to do was give money to the church or the pastor." A personal relationship with Jesus was preached, she said, "but that relationship didn't help me when I got home and I realized I ***still*** didn't have a job. My pastor never told me how to ***use*** Jesus."

This women's comments leads to yet another concern about Jesus which was voiced - that of having a 'personal relationship' with him. "I don't know", said a young man, "folks talk about having a personal relationship but I don't see where it's done much good." In reality, the conversion experience, which for African Americans gained popularity during the Great Awakening, ***has*** done much for the converts. It ***did*** give them a sense of closeness with God, thereby bypassing the effect of so-called "religious instruction" offered by Anglican priests. It did help instill the sense of Christian values, and so in effect, girded the slaves with Jesus' own words as they sought freedom. It helped them reject

oppression and to use Jesus to do it; their attitude, upon 'knowing' Jesus first-hand, was that he would support them and ***not*** condemn them to hell. Notes Raboteau:

> The clerical argument that Christianity made slaves more docile was weakened in South Carolina in 1725, when some slaves who embraced Christianity participated in secret poisonings and bloody insurrection ... Rev. William Cotes, of St. George's Parish ... interviewed a Christian slave condemned to death in 1751 for her part in poisoning slave-holders ... she hoped to be saved because she believed in Christ.[105]

That sense of empowerment, however, is perceived to have eroded, "the farther we got from slavery", said one student, and "only made us feel we were completely bad people." The feeling of personal depravity on the part of African Americans, in a social system which holds them to be ***naturally*** depraved, has taken its toll, and some African Americans rejected the conversion experience -- and therefore, Jesus - in order to escape that snare. It would seem that an entire study on the effect of the conversion experience on 20th century African Americans would be in order. Said yet another student, "It has seemed like all the people do who say they 'know' Jesus do is sing, pray, shout and go to church. In my neighborhood, you couldn't get them out of church, and if you did, they'd make you mad, they acted so snooty. Like they was (sic) better than everybody else."

What has happened? Can it be said that at least some African Americans have suffered a deep spiritual loss as their image of Jesus has disintegrated? Among whom has the disintegration occurred? Although this conjecture demands a study, it is very possible that the disintegration has been related to African American class than to race, i.e., as some African Americans

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[105] Raboteau, Slave Religion, p. 124.

have ascended economically, they have been eager to abandon vestiges of their past, of which they are ashamed. They have flocked to churches and/or denominations where "Africanisms" or "African-Americanisms" have been all but absent. They have abandoned gospel music and external symbols of joy, such as clapping.

But, as Vincent Wimbush has identified, African Americans are today experiencing a crisis and in so doing, have begun to embrace not only fundamentalism, but fundamentalism which is merely 'Christian' (or white). Their souls cry out for the feeding their slave religion gave them, and although they still seek to forget "race" as a factor in the religious experience, ***they seek the religious experience***. Perhaps they would seek that experience in an African American setting were they able to receive a message of "black self-confidence and pride," which, Wimbush concludes, may not be happening:

> ... some African Americans have embraced fundamentalism because they are experiencing a crisis. Their crisis has to do with their perception of culturalist religion - African American religion - to vouchsafe, or guarantee, the traditions are "Christian." Buttressing this perception is the assumption that anything distinctively black is inadequate in the white world. Of course, this latter assumption ... [in light of] the failures of the African American leadership itself ... [is] confirmed in the eyes of many. This is the case even in the churches, where black self-confidence and pride were concentrated...[106]

Surely this phenomenon, this problem, calls out for a radical re-examination of the religious experience, and of the ***way*** Jesus is preached, in the African American church. If the message of Jesus has eroded into competitions of hermeneutical prowess, as opposed to having continually evolved with the time and the people of the time, then, it seems, a reexamination is necessary. The

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[106] Vincent L. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans" in Cain Hope Felder, ed., Stony The Road We Trod, p. 97.

message of Jesus, for the African American of the twentieth century, cannot afford to be less than it was for him or her in the eighteenth century, for while there may not be a 'master' in the same sense as in the days of slavery, there are yet many 'masters' for African Americans to want to overcome - masters like drugs and violence, masters like prejudice and discrimination, or ***the*** master, called institutional racism. As such, the message of Jesus needs to be "this worldly," enabling present-day African Americans to realize, first, that the battle is not yet won, and two, that God and Jesus continue to be the generals of that battle, as they have been, historically.

In short, the message of Jesus must have the same effect now as it did in the eighteenth century: giving African Americans the ability and the courage to "obey the commands of God even when they contradict the commands of men,"[107] and in so doing, instill in them a "sense of moral superiority and moral authority"[108] over the masters which would govern them even now.

The message of Jesus must still inspire freedom.

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[107] Raboteau, p. 318.

[108] Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

THE REAPPLICABLE MODEL

This manual is written specifically for pastors of Bible class teachers who have gone through the class themselves. There is a specific requirement to teach this class: that one must have examined his or her own christology fully, asking oneself questions and then struggling to come to some sort of resolution. Each potential teacher needs to have fully examined his or her own thoughts on what it means to be a Christian; what he or she feels relative to specific church doctrine such as that of the Incarnation or Trinity. Each teacher needs to have examined his or her own beliefs on the ethics of Jesus, and pastors need to examine their preaching and teaching of that ethical system. Teachers need to be able to answer the following questions after having struggled within themselves:

1. Was Jesus the Son of God? Why do we believe that and what doubts do we have?
2. Do I believe Jesus is ***the only*** way to reach God the Father?
3. Do I believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus?
4. Can a person be a Christian and not believe Jesus was the Son of God?
5. Do I believe Jesus performed miracles? What sort of miracles does he perform today? What miracles has he performed in my life?
6. Do I believe in the Doctrine of the Incarnation - i.e., that Jesus was both divine and human?
7. Do I believe in his divinity more than his humanity, or vise versa?

8. Do I believe Jesus has been an effective answer for Christians as they struggle with problems today?
9. Do I believe Jesus is "coming back"? Am I disenchanted or disappointed that he has taken so long?
10. How do I articulate my belief in salvation? Do I fully believe that Jesus is necessary for salvation?
11. Is the sex of Jesus important? Is his race? Could I respect and worship him if he were not a male or if he were not Caucasian?
12. Do I believe the message of Jesus dictates that Christians wait until they die to experience peace?
13. Do I believe that one who believes in Jesus should show signs of changed behavior?
14. Do I believe that one must be a member of my denomination to be "saved"? How do I back that claim scripturally?
15. What are my own perceptions of Jesus and how did I get them?[109]

All teachers should go through this class, addressing these questions, perhaps letting question #15 be the introductory one. It is important to go through the questions, and ***in the process, anticipate other questions your students may have***. Teachers who engage in this class ought to be open to historical and form-critical methods of Biblical study, and ought to assume that many students will have questions about ***Jesus which they should be encouraged to ask***. Students who take this class ought to be

[109] The following questions were included later in the questionnaire, per the suggestion of Dr. Samuel Proctor:

1. Do I believe that the Living Christ is a reality today and available to all who have faith in Him?
2. Do I believe that his return must be physical?
3. Do I believe that Jesus came to bring to all the abundant life?
4. Do I believe that Jesus wanted to see the Kingdom come on earth as it was in heaven?

fairly grounded in Bible studies which have enabled them to examine the Scriptures sociologically, culturally, and historically, because it is possible that some Scriptural dissection may be necessary in order to satisfactorily answer questions.

The goal of the class is to reach a deeper understanding of Jesus through searching the scriptures and some suggested texts, using students' own questions and concerns as a guide. Each teacher must understand that there is a presumption that, having taken a class, each student will leave with a conviction about Jesus' message and a desire to try to live as he lived. They should have that desire, with the full understanding that the Christian life is not an easy one, nor one which comes without effort. Students should leave understanding Jesus' work toward reconciliation of humans to God the Father, with a desire to be part and parcel of that reconciliation.

Attempts should be made be the teacher to dispel myths about what Jesus requires; his personality and his actions should be used as a guideline. Students should understand what Jesus would ***say***, for example, about anger based on his bouts with anger, or what would he say about joy, or pain, or patience, etc. If a student, for example, has a low opinion about Jesus because he advocated "meekness" in the Beatitudes, the teacher ought to be aggressive in understanding what he meant by the term, by doing a word study , by comparing different Biblical translations, etc. The class ought to be an exercise in Christian growth by mutual sharing on the part of the students and teacher.

Teacher ought to be prepared for a host of questions and concerns, ***and ought to encourage*** the sharing of the same. Teachers who instruct the class more than once ought to also understand that each time it is taught, new

aspects of Jesus will be shared.

There is no one text for the class but several are suggested. They are:

John Bowder, Jesus: The Unanswered questions (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988)

Leonard Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989)

Renita Weems, Just a Sister Away (San Diego: LuraMedia Publications, 1988)

John A. J. Robinson, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963)

In addition, teachers need to be familiar with Harry Emerson Fosdick's book, The Manhood Of The Master (New York: Grosset&Dunlap, 1913). This book, excellent for outlining the personality of Jesus, is no longer in print and will have to be obtained from one's local library. It is a ***must*** for this class, however, as teachers attempt to present the person of Jesus in a complete way. Teachers might also want to include David L. Edwards, Ed, The Honest to God Debate (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) as well as Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel's, The Women Around Jesus (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982) for discussion and teaching on Jesus and women.

Of course, each teacher should pick a scriptural focus for the class. It may be the Beatitudes in Matthew, of the Gospel of Luke, or any of the texts mentioned above. Any teacher ought to have chosen and mediated on the chosen Scripture and realize that each time the class is taught, the scriptural focus can and should change. The Synoptic Gospels should be the books from which the scriptural focus is chosen, as they are assumed to be the most accurate depictions of who Jesus was and what he said. Teachers should be prepared for questions about, say, Paul's ***interpretation*** of who Jesus was of

what he said, but the Pauline epistles ***should not*** be the scriptural foci for this class. Questions and concerns lifted from your students should frame your course outline.

Finally, it would be advisable that teachers have students keep a journal as a requirement of this class, noting their questions and concerns at the beginning of the class and seeing if those perceptions change by the time the class is ended.

Suggested time for the class is a ***minimum*** of 12 weeks, though teachers may choose to expand that time period if necessary. actually, a one-year class would only begin to give adequate time to the issues at hand.

For this model, I am using comments taken from students, and am using Jesus: The Unanswered Questions and Fosdick's The Manhood Of The Master as my text-guides.

Introduction

What Do I Really Think About Jesus?

I. This course is partly determined by issues and questions which you, the students, raise about your perceptions of Jesus.

   A. Give Christian doctrinal "overview" of Jesus - Virgin Birth, Incarnation, Teachings, Activities, Healings, Trinity, Ascension, Resurrection, etc.

   B. Discuss the reality of the "historical" Jesus.

   C. Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John contain the life of Jesus as we know it. Give history of gospels, including order of compilation,

when each was written relative to existence of Jesus on earth.

D. There is a difference between what Jesus said and how epistle writers interpreted his hermeneutic.

II. What are students' perceptions of Jesus?

III. Issues raised:

A. Doubt about Jesus being the only intercessor between humans and God.

B. Do people go to hell if they don't accept Jesus as God's son?

C. The way Jesus has been used to subjugate and oppress people. Do the Gospels really justify that behavior?

D. Was Jesus real?

E. Doubt about the Virgin Birth.

F. Doubt about his divinity.

G. Anger over his depiction as male and white.

H. Jesus' treatment of women and what he would say about the woman's role in church. Should women be pastors?

I. Confusion over how Jesus wants Christians to act. Are Christians allowed to be angry?

J. Jesus was too meek and soft spoken.

K. How do some denominations justify their claim that "their" way is the "right" way to worship.

L. What would Jesus say about other ***religions*** (not denominations).

M. How does Jesus want Christians to handle evil? Do Christians have to be martyrs?

N. Doubt about the sinlessness of Jesus and what that says to

Christians.

O. Why does Jesus have to be sexless?

P. Why did Jesus have to be baptized?

Q. Why does Jesus teach submissiveness? To believe in Jesus is to consent to being controlled and manipulated.

R. How does the Western perception of Jesus differ from that in countries like Africa (East and West), Asia, and India?

S. We need to study the artistic depictions of Jesus.

T. Where, geographically, did Jesus live?[110]

Note to teachers: Each teacher should use the first class to give an overall perspective of Jesus, based on written theology, personal theology, and honest self-examination. The same questions which the teacher used in the self examination can be given to the students. ***Questions should be encouraged.***

The list above represents just some of the issues raised by class conducted at this writer's church. For the next three weeks, we spent time in dialogue about those issues, formulating how a class such as this should be composed. This class suggested, for example, that a class be held on artistic depictions of the Christ, with students being allowed to discuss their feelings on how Jesus has always "looked" through the eyes of the classicists as opposed to what he may really have looked like. Another suggestion was to study West African concepts of Jests, as opposed to the Western version. Actually, a class on all

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[110] The following questions were included later in the questionnaire, per the suggestion of Dr. Samuel Proctor:

1. Were his ethical principles valid?
2. Does he inspire personal dignity and growth?
3. Did he treat women, children, the poor, the weak, the sick in ways that you would approve?
4. Have followers of Jesus initiated social reforms and movements?

(or many) of the conceptions of Jesus, a subject the possibilities of which are raised in Bowden's book, Jesus: The unanswered Questions,might be a teacher's prerogative.

For this manual, we have proposed an outline that might be followed, to address the concern on the divinity of Jesus, and this class might actually be Part I, in which two major doctrines or beliefs: that of the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation, are used as focal points from which to build the class. In so doing, the class must study those doctrines, and hopefully, at the end of a 12 week period, the questions students have about Jesus' divinity will be closer to resolution.

The class outline might look like the following:

Week 1 Introduction.

Week 2 Class scope: "The Divinity of Jesus"

Texts: Holy Bible

The Birth of the Messiah (New York: Doubleday&Co., 1977)

Subject: The Virgin Birth - "As scriptural reality"

Texts: Luke 2: 1-20; Matthew 1: 18, 2:12

Week 3 The Divinity of Jesus: "As myth"

Week 4 The Virgin Birth: the babe as God and human

Week 5 The Divinity of Jesus: "The Incarnation" - as scriptural reality

Text: John 1: 1-14

Week 6 The Incarnation: As part of 'supernatural' Christian theology

Texts: Honest to God

Dear Mr. Brown

The Myth of God Incarnate

Week 7 The Incarnation: As Christian necessity

Same texts

Class focus: How necessary is the dual nature of Jesus

Week 8 The Incarnation: As example of human capabilities

Text: The Manhood of the Master

(Teacher should lift certain 'human' qualities of Jesus as points of departure for discussion.)

Focus of discussion: Is/was Jesus' divinity necessary for his exemplorary human behavior?

Week 9 Jesus' divinity and his role as mediator

Text: Gospel of John, selected scriptures

How does Jesus' role as mediator differ from that of other mediators?

(Example: Buddhism) Is he ***the only*** way to the Father?

Week 10 Expectations of Jesus based on his divinity - a class discussion

Week 11 Expectations of Jesus based on his divinity

Week 12 In-class paper: Personal feelings on the divinity of Jesus

Teachers might want to follow such a course outline. and then begin Part II of the series of classes on Jesus, choosing another concern or question from those raised by class members. An interesting class might be based on John Bowden's book, Jesus: The Unanswered Questions, or on a chapter from that book. At this writer's church, we are going to study from two chapters: "What Can We Really Know About Jesus?" and "The Kaleidoscopic Christ". The class actually suggested an outline which looked like this:

Week 1 Introduction

Week 2 Aspects of Jesus' personality

Week 3 The western view of Jesus

Week 4 Other wordly view of Jesus (or comparative theologies)

Week 5 Comparative theologies

Week 6 Jesus' attitude toward women

Week 7 Denominational interpretations of Jesus

Week 8 Denominational interpretations of Jesus

Week 9 Jesus and culture: the power threat he presents

Week 10 Jesus as depicted in Western art. How did Jesus become Italian? (their question)

Week 11 Jesus' maleness: Is maleness a criteria for divinity?

Week 12 Review and "putting together

This class, as the one outlined earlier, could be a self-contained unit of be used as a spin-off for a series of classes on Jesus. The more interaction between students and teacher, the more apparent the ***type*** and ***scope*** any class should be. For example, the students may, as these students did, raise the question of Jesus and what some called his "permission" of anti-Semitism, due to the silence of Christians during the Holocaust. Another student raised the question, "How is Jesus valid for moral living when many moral codes never mention his name?". Each class, we repeat will be different.

The only "constant" between these classes is that they should be marked by three components: an "introduction" in which the problems and issues are identified; a "body" where an issue or a few issues, will be addressed, pulling apart, most often, widely held misconceptions and replacing them with heightened awareness; and, finally, a "review and putting together"; not unlike

that which is done at the end of seminary Bible survey classes. The nature of these classes on Jesus is, after all, exegetical in nature, and any pulling at the seams of a person's belief-system requires very careful and intentional 'putting back together'.

The desired result, after all, is not total disenchantment with Jesus, but a deepened knowledge of what he stood for and demands of his followers. There will be no universal interpretation, (although this writer believes the Synoptics provides for such a result) but there should be a lessening of misconceptions. The 'down' side of such a project is that, depending on the teacher, misconceptions may only be reinforced. If a teacher comes to the class intent, say, on reinforcing a dogmatic view of Jesus, as opposed to being willing to explore other possibilities, the class may do more harm than good. That's why teacher self-exploration is mandatory, and teachers must be honest enough with themselves to admit willingness or unwillingness to deal openly with the subject matter.

This is not a class for all teachers or all students.

CHAPTER 7

POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF JESUS AND THE HERMENEUTICAL GOAL

If it is a fact that at least among some Christian hearers there are some very real problems with their perceptions of Jesus. It follows that for the Christian preacher there are some problems as well. The goal of preaching, or the "hermeneutical goal", is to ***convict*** listeners of the truth and necessity of the Good News. Preaching is not, or should not, be done for preaching's sake. It is a privilege afforded to certain human beings by God himself, so that God's message is traversed through miles of human experience to the human soul. At the end of the preaching experience the soul should at least be trembling, having been touched with something new and vital to its well-being.

That hermeneutical goal, however, faces a severe challenge in light of some of today's thinking of and regard for, Jesus. The preacher faces not expectant, naive first-century Christians, but late 20th century Christians who are cynical, wise, and disenchanted with Jesus, many of them, because of the way he has been represented, presented and interpreted by the preacher. The preacher has not been able to, or perhaps has been unwilling to, address some of the questions which plague believers - or, some preachers have carried with them to the pulpit their own biases ***and*** unanswered questions, and have on that basis been unable to address the confusion and discontent.

Some of this reluctance to deal interrogatively with Jesus is quite natural, given the way most of us are admonished never to question God. Walter Bruggemann talks about the "cultural context of preaching" in which there is

"***only God***," and "***only me***." The "only me" feeling leads to alienation and the "only God" motif leads to vagueness. Bruggemann writes:

> Preaching happens in the context of those who believe, but ... in reduced ways. There is a yearning for communion, but it is communion that has been rendered well-nigh impossible. Either there is an exaggerated self that gives God no access, or there is an exaggerated God who permits nothing of the transaction. Those with an exaggerated sense of self end in alienation, left all alone. Those with an exaggerated God are engaged in denial, which in the end generates rage and despair.[111]

The Christian preacher must recognize that while the feelings of alienation and rage might exist normally for any believer, they might be increased as pertains to Jesus. Jesus, after all, was supposed to be accessible in order to make God more accessible, but instead, God has remained transcendent while Christians - lay and clergy alike - have stumbled around their own confusion God's son. In the confusion, there has developed an uneasy relationship between God and his people, a relationship characterized by doubts, questions and countless issues. God has yearned for communion between himself and his children, but because of the fear of prodding, asking questions, ***demanding*** relationship based on real communication, that communion has dearly suffered. Jesus, sent to be mediator, has failed in his mission for many believers ***because*** the preacher, sent as mediator between people and Jesus, has likewise failed.

Does such a statement suggest that Jesus has limits? The answer must be that we as preachers ***have*** placed limits on him, by not understanding or accepting him fully ourselves. We the clergy are uneasy, many of us, in our relationship with him, and have passed that uneasiness on. Or, we are too cocky that ***our*** way, not necessarily Jesus' way, is the right way (that is another way of communicating our uneasiness) and we have likewise passed that on.

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[111] John Bowden, Jesus: The Unanswered Questions, p. 49.

In the process, ***we*** have lost touch with Jesus; we have, some of us, diluted or hyped his message, and have thus been responsible for simply not delivering the Good News in such a way as to effect reconciliation of human to human, and of humans to God.

The question is, then, what does or should the Christian preacher do? We are going to make an assumption that the Christian preacher has at least the desire to preach Jesus, and that he or she wants to preach Jesus in such a way to effect reconciliation. The preacher faces not only a sea of expectant, yet disappointed or disenchanted believers, as well as those who ***think*** they know Jesus and may not, really. How does the preacher get through rage, alienation, grief, fear, disenchantment and hopelessness? How does the preacher make Jesus triumphant in a world which is not sure on how to receive him?

It has to be a goal of the preacher, first, to examine his or her own self and, being brutally honest, uncover his or her feelings on Christian doctrine and dogma. How wedded is the preacher to the doctrine as opposed to the ***person*** of Jesus? How much rage or alienation does the preacher have? Does the preacher know Jesus personally or simply know about him?

This type of self-query is vital, for, depending on where the preacher is, and what the preacher feels, will determine what his or her hermeneutical goal is. If we assume that the goal is to effect reconciliation, we must understand that an ingestion and thorough digestion of Jesus' words is necessary. That goal of reconciliation, however, may not be the preacher's goal. He or she might be more concerned with the protection of denominationalism, or with the teaching of doctrine; the ***experience*** of religion and of Jesus the Christ may be quite secondary. Thus, the preacher does well to define his or her hermeneutical

goal.

We, as we do this, make an implicit assumption: that many of us come to the pulpit with "our own programs." That should not be the case: Karl Barth asserts that "the preacher who believes in Christ will never present himself to his congregation in a way that they will suppose him able to bestow on them Christ and the Spirit;"[112] neither should he or she present the gospel to the congregation in such a way as to minimize its importance or value as it relates to doctrine, dogma, or the institutionalized church. One will not know if he or she is doing either of these things unless he or she continually submits to careful self-examination. Because, for example, a Christian or aspiring Christian has difficulty embracing the Doctrine of the Trinity, for example, does not mean he or she ought to be hermeneutically abandoned by the preacher. The preacher must understand that the reality of reconciliation can work ***in spite of*** a Christian's struggle with Christian dogma or doctrine, and that, actually, his or her acceptance of those doctrines may come after the message of Jesus is effectively preach.

What all this means is that the preacher must come to the pulpit fully ***convicted*** of Jesus' message personally - ***if*** he or she is going to preach Jesus. At least, if absolute conviction is not there, there ought to be the most sincere struggle to experience that conviction. If the preacher finds it difficult to preach about Jesus in a convincing or comfortable way, he or she must come to terms with that personally, praying that the struggle be resolved for the good of those who want and who need to receive Jesus' message. The danger of ***not*** recognizing the struggle, and merely keeping silent, is that all hope for

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[112] Paul Tillich, "What is Truth?" in The New Being (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 68.

conversation and communion with Jesus is lost, and therefore, the possibility of reconciliation is either lost or greatly diminished. The preacher must prick the souls of the listeners so as to evoke ***their*** desire to talk to Jesus; to communicate to him, and therefore to God, their hopes, pains, doubts, fears, questions, and to be able to hear and respond to, his response. The preacher must come to terms with his or her blockages to such communion in order to be able to effectively carry out the ultimate hermeneutical goal of reaching people who are, as Bruggemann says:

> ... [burdened with] layers and layers of alienation that result from sin and that are experienced as guilt. The gathered congregation includes those who are profoundly burdened with guilt, whose lives are framed by deep wrong, by skewed relations beyond resolve, shareholders in the public drama of brutality and exploitation. There is a heaviness ... the heaviness is poorly matched by yearning...[113]

The preacher of the Gospel must assume that this yearning is for a void to be filled, for a way, or a blueprint, for building a new life, is what is present, and that the blueprint is none other but Jesus and his message.

The preacher must also, in delivering the Good News, be cognizant and prayerfully aware of the need to dispel myths and misconceptions - i.e., what may be popular but ***incorrect*** perceptions of Jesus. The Gospel must be read, absorbed, prayed over and read again, in order for ***Jesus'*** message, as opposed to the Catholic or Methodist or Lutheran or Presbyterian interpretation of the message, to be delivered. The preacher must assume the responsibility for using Jesus' message as a means to help people overcome guilt, rage, self-hatred-and thus be led to changed behavior.

There is also a need for the preacher to recognize the need to speak to

[113] Ibid, pp. 63-74.

both the heads and the hearts of the listeners. A listener will hear first the words of Jesus and absorb them intellectually, the preacher must be careful to explain, expound, illustrate ... whatever it takes to make the Scriptures come alive. When that is all said and done, however, the preacher must work to reach the ***soul*** or the conscience of each listener; that is the place of ***conviction*** in the proclamation of the Gospel. A sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love In Action" is included in this chapter to show how at least one preacher accomplished that mixture. A sermon which is too intellectual will escape the soul; an emotion-wrought sermon minus intellect will bore the inquisitive. If the imbalance on either side occurs, the message of Jesus will have lost at least half of its effectiveness.

The sermons included in this chapter are intended to give examples of how Jesus has been preached by well-known theologians and preachers. The reader is invited to evaluate how the balance between head and heart has been achieved, if at all. The preacher is also encouraged to determine if, having been delivered any of these sermons, he or she would be likely to be more or less interested in exploring Jesus and his message. Do the sermons work toward better popular perceptions of Jesus, or do they simply remain, or help maintain, the status quo?

Finally, in light of the sermons presented, the preacher is invited to examine his or her own sermons and determine what has been the hermeneutical goal? Where, in ***your*** sermons, has Jesus been presented, and for what end?

CALL FOR GOD[114]

Karl Barth

BUT TAKE HEART

Great and holy God, in your dear son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you Came into our midst as one of us, you have become ours, so that we might be utterly yours! So you have given us the permission, the command and the power to know you, to love and praise you. To do this in common we have gathered this evening before the festival of your birth. We would like to thank you for the work of your almighty mercy. We must certainly confess at once that we, and our thoughts and our words and our life, again and again fall disgracefully short of what you are and what you do for us. And so we can only ask you not to remove your strong and kind hand from us, and still to be our father and brother, Saviour and Lord.

Grant us too at this time something of the incomprehensible and undeserved grace of your presence! Let us learn in the light of your word and in the power of your spirit to understand you and one another and ourselves a little better, and so let us gain new comfort, new courage, new patience, new hope! Let this take place today and tomorrow every where where men—whether they know it or not—wait for the mystery of Christmas to be revealed to them as their salvation and their life! Our Father . . . Amen.

In the world you face anxiety; but take heart, I have conquered the world.

JOHN I6-33

My dear friends, we have all come together on this Christmas Eve to prepare ourselves together to hear the Christmas message tomorrow. *You* know that this time many other people who can not be seen are listening on the radio as we pray here and sing and have God's Word spoken to us: outside in the city, in the rest of Switzerland, even in great parts of Germany. That ought to please us

[114] Karl Barth, "But Take Heart" in Call For God (New York, Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967) pp. 105-115.

rather than disturb us. We have just sung 'Now shall the air with shouts declare:Jesus Christ's born'. That is how we greet those who are listening with us.

I have conquered the world. That is the message of Christmas. *"I"!* The Child in the manger of Bethlehem says this to us—with the greatest humility, but also with the greatest power and emphasis. *I,* the Son of God, the almighty father, the creator of heaven and earth! *I,* whom he has given to you men as a son of man like yourselves, so that he may be your God and you may be his people—so that the salvation, the peace, the joy of this covenant may come upon you! I have conquered the world. Not you wicked men, nor you good men either, not you foolish nor you clever men, not you believers nor you unbelievers. No Pope and no Council, no government and no university has done this, no science and no technology—even if you were to succeed the day after tomorrow in sledging along the Milky Way. I have done it.

I have conquered the *world.* The world is involved in the Christmas message. The world: our great dwelling-house, built and arranged so well and so splendidly as God's creation—and now for all that so full of darkness, a place of so much wrong and sadness. The world: ourselves, we men, also created well by God and intended from the beginning to be his children—and now for all that, fallen away from him, his enemies, and so enemies of one another, and so each his own enemy. It is this very world that God loved so very much and in such a way that he was willing to bestow on it, and did bestow on it, me, his **son**— that's what the child of Bethlehem says.

I have *conquered* the world, says this child. A great Lord was needed to do to do this. Yes, but that is what he is. A strange Lord in deed, quite different from

the other great lords who claim to be able to conquer this or that continent, subdue it and bring it under control by cunning and violence. A Lord who as the child of poor people was born abroad in a stable, and was laid in a manger beside an ox and an ass—and who knows if the wood of this manger was not taken from the same forest from which wood was later hewn again to build a cross? For this child has conquered the world by letting himself be delivered up for its sin and guilt to the death of shame. This way he snatched it from ruin. This way he reconciled it with God. This way he won it for God. This way he restored it. This way he gave us men back to ourselves more splendid than before.

I have conquered the world, we hear. Not: *I* shall do it some day! but: it is finished, it has happened. I have done it. *All you* need to do now is to notice, and get ready to accept the fact, that you are living in a world conquered by me—and are already men conquered by me.

That is the Christmas message. To hear it, to let it take effect, to digest it, to live by it—this is what we wish to prepare our selves for together on this Christmas Eve: I have conquered the world.

But wait. If he, Jesus Christ, did not tell us this, it might seem too good to be true. But he is the very one who tells us, just as we heard—first of all, in fact—something else quite different: *In the world you face anxiety.*

In German *'Angst'* (anxiety) has a good deal to do with *'Enge'* (tightness). Anxiety is constriction, oppression, affliction by some danger that threatens us. And now the Lord does not tell us that we might face or should or ought to face anxiety. Nor does he reproach us for being anxious. He simply states it as a plain fact: In the world you face anxiety.

Would we perhaps prefer not to hear anything on this subject? Do we think

perhaps: that has nothing to do with Christmas time, or our Christmas carols, Christmas lights and Christmas presents? Let us beware, my friends: our whole Christmas atmosphere could be dishonest, a great delusion, if we were unwilling to listen to this as well: In the world you face anxiety. It is the child in the manger at Bethlehem, it is the man who was nailed to the Cross on Golgotha who tells us both things: I have conquered the world -- and: In the world you face anxiety. If we were to try to shut our ears to the second statement, then we would not hear or understand the first. So let us listen without offense when we are told: We face anxiety—even the strong men among us, even now, even on this Christmas Eve.

There is anxiety that affects many young people: anxiety about themselves, about the life in front of them with its uncanny difficulties, which they are perhaps just beginning to suspect, or which they already know only too well.

There is anxiety that affects old people: anxiety about the increase in their bodily and mental ailments and infirmities—the thought that their whole future might now lie behind them and that they might no longer be of use for anything.

There is at all ages an anxiety called claustrophobia: fear of people, perhaps particularly of those closest to us who always want something, always encroach too much—fear of the crowding in of the many, in whose midst one curiously enough feels utterly lonely and lost.

There is a well justified anxiety about heavy responsibilities which can be placed upon us: I need not hide from you the fact that for as long as I can remember, every time when I am to preach, and so too yesterday and today, I have felt anxious.

There is—this too is a very serious thing—anxiety in the face of the continual passage of time, of the days, weeks and years of this our one and only short life. Does it not seem as if we spent this time just gossiping? Is it not as if we were running away from it?

And then there is anxiety at events threatening us with danger or destruction: such as a fatal illness whose insidious approach we suspect. The unimaginable fear of those eighty people in the air craft crashing at Durrenasch in the minutes and seconds when they could not fail to notice what inevitably faced them—and likewise the fear of the people in Skopje when the earth tremors came, one after the other—and likewise the fear of the people in the Piave valley when the dam burst and the floods broke through to engulf whole villages.

And were we not seized too with great anxiety a month ago when the shattering news of the murder of the American President came through—and the next day the distasteful news of the murder of his murderer: anxiety at what was now to take place, and simply the anxiety at the grim possibilities which obviously may really take place in the life of human society at any moment?

Does it not arouse anxiety in us to see how certain errors and lies which had been thought to be overcome, perhaps overcome for centuries, break out afresh and gather strength in the history of mankind, even among Christians? Does not the thought some times force itself on us that we might be living in one great mad house—and is that not a thought that arouses anxiety?

And of course we live in constant anxiety over the atomic bomb, about which so many people nowadays are troubled either openly or in secret and about which one would earnestly wish that many more people might be deeply troubled. It is all very well now that there is an agreement that further experiments with this

devilish device are to be carried out in future only under the ground. And it is all very well that according to the resolutions of last week even our own dear Switzerland has associated itself with this agreement. But are not too great stocks of this devilish device already available in various places which are sufficient to wipe out all life on our planet many times over? And does not the whole business painfully remind us of the story we can find in the works of Jeremiah Gotthelf about the black spider, bringing death in its wake, which had indeed been care fully kept in a hole in the wall sealed with a plug, until one day a fool came along, tore out the plug and gave free vent to destruction? We have often been very wisely taught that nowadays we must simply 'live with the bomb'. That's all very well, but it still means that nowadays we must live with this particular anxiety.

Another thing: might not one or other of you people even face anxiety about the very festival of Christmas itself: anxiety about the painful memory of previous, better Christmas days—anxiety about the loneliness which you might have to put up with at Christmas—anxiety about the invitation to be cheerful today, when you cannot be cheerful at all—anxiety about God, with whom we get on very familiar and plain-speaking terms at Christmas and yet with whom we are so very far from being in the clear?

In short, it is like this: in the world you face anxiety. Of course we also need the word of the Lord for us to admit this and give it proper consideration. But it is like this and we now can sum up everything that *I* have merely hinted at under one head: we are anxious to face life, which can just as well be called being anxious to face death, because the great anxiety that threatens us is that we shall find our life surrounded by death, by utter extinction looming up on all sides, and by

the nothingness to which life is subjected without hope of being saved. We are afraid of the night when no one can work. Certainly there are all sorts of little, unnecessary, passing anxieties, but strictly speaking they too are signs, as it were, symptoms of the great anxiety to face life and death which affects us all: deeply hidden perhaps, but affecting all of us.

Dear friends, to Christmas Eve, to our preparation for hearing the message of Christmas belongs a duty that we cannot shirk, namely to accept and admit that in the world we face anxiety.

But enough now on this subject! The same person who tells each one of us that we face anxiety in the world, the child in the manger and the man on the Cross, goes on to say, indeed to shout unmistakably into all the restless sea of our anxiety: *But take heart.*

Here we have it once again: the powerful, glorious *But!,* which we meet in so many other places in the Bible as well. Something undeniably and unshakably true is given us here to remember at all times, such as: With men this is impossible. Or: The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed. Or: Heaven and earth shall pass away. Or: The Lord has disciplined me severely. But then a second statement is set against this, which though not denying the first one and so not canceling and wiping it out, suddenly makes it seem trivial for all that and overshadows it. For instance: But with God all things are possible. Or: But my kindness shall not depart from you. Or: But my words shall not pass away. Or: But he has not given me over unto death. So in this case also: In the world you face anxiety. *But take heart.*

'Take heart' does not mean: Just think of something else. Jump across the thing that is causing you anxiety. Run away from your anxiety—to some amusement

or to some feverish activity or to some wild undertaking. *You* can and will not escape from it any more than you can escape from yourselves. And be careful: this very attempt to run away from anxiety, utterly impossible and useless as it is, for some reason or other is regularly the cause of all evil and all new suffering.

Take heart means: open your eyes and look up: to the hills from whence comes your aid—and look forwards: to the few paces you can take on your way now without hindrance. And then walk on with firm steps: Then take courage. Then even cheer up a bit—right where you are, in the middle of the anxiety, the great anxiety, about facing life and death which no doubt troubles you.

Yes, but can we do this? Is this any more than a word of advice and encouragement given by a well-meaning man which for all that nobody can use in practice, or do anything at all with? The answer is: Certainly *nobody* on *his* own *resources,* with his own inventiveness, understanding and powers of decision, can want to take heart, let alone take heart. Everybody without exception can, however, take heart if he listens to the word telling him that he can and must take heart, when it is spoken to him by the one who himself, as true son of God and son of man, came into the world in which we face anxiety. In the midst of it all he himself felt the greatest anxiety—'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'—but he has conquered this world, reconciled it with God, and so set a limit to the anxiety which we experience. From this limit set by him there shines forth to us, the people that walk in darkness, a great light. *By* seeing this light, following this light— by looking towards him who makes it shine upon us, by holding fast to him, by believing in him as we say—we have his word that we shall be free to take heart: free to be set at rest, not before the

storm, nor after the storm, but right in the middle of the storm of our anxiety, 'when we are in direst distress and do *not* know where to turn'.

So the question whether we can take heart as the Lord orders us really needs a second answer. Just as no one can take heart by himself, so too he can't take heart for him self alone. But each one without exception can certainly take heart, if he lets himself be included among the race of people to which it is said, not privately to this or that one, but in the belonging together of all its members, that it may and must take heart: to the race of people on which, in the darkness of its anxiety to face life and death, the great light shines. But can you really hear in the middle of anxiety the angels singing and saying: Glory to God in the highest? Try it out this way: you can, if you listen also to the rest of what they sang and said: Peace on earth! Peace even in this building! Peace between you and the person who sits next to you or behind you on the bench! Peace between the man in this cell and the one in that cell! Peace between the prisoners and the wardens! And peace between each one here and his relatives at home ! Can you really manage to look up and to look forward? *You* can, by not failing to look to left and right at your neighbors who would also like to look up and look forward and who perhaps only need your assistance to do so. Could you really hold fast to Jesus Christ as your Saviour and believe in him? You will do it by finding in those around you, whether you like or dislike them, not a mass of miscellaneous 'people' but the community loved and called by Jesus Christ who is the Saviour of them all.

Is it quite certain that even you may call yourself a child of God and in fact be one in one in the midst of the world and so in the midst of anxiety? *You* may and must most certainly call yourself one and be one by treating others as your

brothers, because they are also brothers of Jesus Christ and so children of God. This is at all times and for all of us the test of our faith. But why should we fail this test?

So let us on this Christmas Eve prepare ourselves to hear that, in the midst of the anxiety which afflicts us, we may, must and also can take heart. And to listen when we are told that we are allowed to hear this in company with all those to whom the same Lord and Saviour has also said it, and will say it again.

Every year we celebrate Christmas Eve afresh. We are celebrating it today just as we celebrated it last year and as we shall celebrate it next year as well, if we are still alive; and each time on the following day we celebrate Christmas. Let me add just one last thing. *You* know that our whole life in time may and must really be one long Christmas Eve preparing us for the one, great and final, eternal Christmas, which is the goal of all God's ways with mankind and of all his ways too with each single one of us. So I shall now read a few more verses from the end of the last book of the Bible which deal with this eternal Christmas: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished, and there was no longer any sea. And I John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice proclaiming from the throne: 'Now at last God has his dwelling among men! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away!" Then he who sat on the throne said, "Behold! I am making all things new!" ' Amen.

O Lord Jesus Christ, if everything is not to be worthless, then you yourself must come to us and speak to us of the glory of what you were for us and did for us, and still are and still do and will again be and again do—and of the sober truth that in the world we face anxiety— above all, however, of the joyful hope by which we may now and for ever hold fast to you. We are such poor, deaf and dumb people. Open our ears so that we can hear you—and our mouths so that we can bear witness to you for one another! Speak your word to all of us so that, called together by you, we may become utterly your people, utterly your community! Tell it to each one so that he is not only called a Christian but may again and again become one afresh. Tell it too to all our relatives at home! Tell it to all the prisoners in all the prisons in every corner of the earth! Tell it to the sick, the suffering, the dying across there in the hospitals! Tell it to all the crowd of people who are excited, worried and weary! Tell it to the sad and the spiteful, those who are too superficial and too thoughtful, too religious and too irreligious! Tell it to parents and children, teachers, writers and newspaper correspondents, the members of our administrative authorities and courts, the ministers and their congregations, the great and strong and the humble and weak of all races! We all need to hear you telling us this as only you can tell us. And so grant us all a good Christmas: tomorrow and at the goal and end of our days and the days of all men!

Christ, you Lamb of God, who carry away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us, grant us your peace! Amen.

STRENGTH TO LOVE[115]

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Love In Action

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them;
for they know not what they do.
Luke 23:34

Few words in the New Testament more clearly and solemnly express the magnanimity of Jesus' spirit than that sublime utterance from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This is love at its best.

We shall not fully understand the great meaning of Jesus' prayer unless we first notice that the text opens with the word "then." The verse immediately preceding reads thus: "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactor, one on the right hand, and the other on the left." Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them." *Then*—when he was being plunged into the abyss of nagging agony. *Then*—when man had stooped to his worst. *Then*—when he was dying a most ignominious death. *Then*—when the wicked hands of the creature had dared to crucify the only begotten Son of the Creator. Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them." That "then" might well have been otherwise. He could have said, "Father, get even with them," or "Father, let loose the mighty thunderbolts of righteous wrath and destroy them," or "Father, open the flood gates of justice and permit the staggering avalanche of retribution to pour upon them." But none of these was

[115] Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love In Action" in Strength To Love (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 39-48.

his response. Though subjected to inexpressible agony, suffering excruciating pain, and despised and rejected, nevertheless, he cried, "Father, forgive them."

Let us take note of two basic lessons to be gleaned from this text.

I.

First, it is a marvelous expression of Jesus' ability to match words with actions. One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds! We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practices of paganism. We proclaim our devotion to democracy, but we sadly practice the very opposite of the democratic creed. We talk passionately about peace, and at the same time we assiduously prepare for war. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and then we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. This strange dichotomy, this agonizing gulf between the *ought* and the is, represents the tragic theme of man's earthly pilgrimage.

But in the life of Jesus we find that the gulf is bridged. Never in history was there a more sublime example of the consistency of word and deed. During his ministry in the sunny villages of Galilee, Jesus talked passionately about forgiveness. This strange doctrine awakened the questioning mind of Peter. "How oft," he asked, "shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" Peter wanted to be legal and statistical. But Jesus responded by

affirming that there is no limit to forgiveness. "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven." In other words, forgiveness is not a matter of quantity, but of quality. A man cannot forgive up to four hundred and ninety times without forgiveness becoming a part of the habit structure of his being. Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.

Jesus also admonished his followers to love their enemies and to pray for them that despitefully used them. This teaching fell upon the ears of many of his hearers like a strange music from a foreign land. Their ears were not attuned to the tonal qualities of such amazing love. They had been taught to love their friends and hate their enemies. Their lives had been conditioned to seek redress in the time-honored tradition of retaliation. Yet Jesus taught them that only through a creative love for their enemies could they be children of their Father in heaven and also that love and forgiveness were absolute necessities for spiritual maturity.

The moment of testing emerges. Christ, the innocent Son of God, is stretched in painful agony on an uplifted cross. What place is there for love and forgiveness now? How will Jesus react? What will he say? The answer to these questions bursts forth in majestic splendor. Jesus lifts his thorn-crowned head and cries in words of cosmic proportions: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This was Jesus' finest hour; this was his heavenly response to his earthly rendezvous with destiny.

We sense the greatness of this prayer by contrasting it with nature, which, caught in the finality of her own impersonal structure, does not forgive. In spite of the agonizing pleas of men trapped in the path of an onrushing hurricane or the anguished cry of the builder falling from the scaffold, nature expresses only

a cold, serene, and passionless indifference. She must honor everlastingly her fixed, immutable laws. When these laws are violated, she has no alternative except to follow inexorably her path of uniformity. Nature does not and cannot forgive.

Or contrast Jesus' prayer with the slowness of man to forgive. We live according to the philosophy that life is a matter of getting even and of saving face. We bow before the altar of revenge~ Samson, eyeless at Gaza, prays fervently for his enemies—but only for their utter destruction. The potential beauty of human life is constantly made ugly by man's ever recurring song of retaliation.

Or contrast the prayer with a society that is even less prone to forgive. Society must have its standards, norms, and mores.

It must have its legal checks and judicial restraints. Those who fall below the standard and those who disobey the laws are often left in a dark abyss of condemnation and have no hope for a second chance. Ask an innocent young lady, who, after a moment of overriding passion, becomes the mother of an illegitimate child. She will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Ask a public official, who, in a moment's carelessness, betrays the public trust. He will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Go to any prison and ask the inhabitants, who have written shameful lines across the pages of their lives. From behind the bars they will tell you that society is slow to forgive. Make your way to death row and speak with the tragic victims of criminality. As they prepare to make their pathetic walk to the electric chair, their hopeless cry is that society will not forgive. Capital punishment is society's final assertion that it will not forgive.

Such is the persistent story of mortal life. The oceans of history are made

turbulent by the ever-rising tides of revenge. Man has never risen above the injunction of the *lex talionis:* "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to follow its disastrous leading. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path.

Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave every one blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with aggressive love.

What a magnificent lesson! Generations will rise and fall; men will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the altar of retaliation; but ever and again this noble lesson of Calvary will be a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate.

II.

A second lesson comes to us from Jesus' prayer on the cross. It is an expression of Jesus' awareness of man's intellectual and spiritual blindness. "They know not what they do," said Jesus. Blindness was their trouble; enlightenment was their need. We must recognize that Jesus was nailed to the cross not simply by sin but also by blindness. The men who cried, "Crucify him," were not bad men but rather blind men. The jeering mob that lined the roadside which led to Calvary was composed not of evil people but of blind people. They knew not what they did. What a tragedy!

History reverberates with testimonies of this shameful tragedy. Centuries ago a sage named Socrates was forced to drink hemlock. The men who called

for his death were not bad men with demonic blood running through their veins. On the contrary, they were sincere and respectable citizens of Greece. They genuinely thought that Socrates was an atheist because his idea of God had a philosophical depth that probed beyond traditional concepts. Not badness but blindness killed Socrates. Saul was not an evil-intentioned man when he persecuted Christians. He was a sincere, conscientious devotee of Israel's faith. He thought he was right. He persecuted Christians, not because he was devoid of integrity, but because he was devoid of enlightenment. The Christians who engaged in infamous persecutions and shameful inquisitions were not evil men but misguided men. The churchmen who felt that they had an edict from God to withstand the progress of science, whether in the form of a Copernican revolution or a Darwinian theory of natural selection, were not mischievous men but misinformed men. And so Christ's words from the cross are written in sharp etched terms across some of the most inexpressible tragedies of history: "They know not what they do."

This tragic blindness expresses itself in many ominous ways in our own day. Some men still feel that war is the answer to the problems of the world. They are not evil people. On the contrary, they are good, respectable citizens whose ideas are robed in the garments of patriotism. They talk of brinkmanship and a balance of terror. They sincerely feel that a continuation of the arms race will be conducive to more beneficent than maleficent consequences. So they passionately call for bigger bombs, larger nuclear stockpiles, and faster ballistic missiles.

Wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the

spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminates even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survival, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war. A so-called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war— God forbid!—will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to untimely death. Yet there are those who sincerely feel that disarmament is an evil and international negotiation is an abominable waste of time. Our world is threatened by the grim prospect of atomic annihilation because there are still too many who know not what they do.

Notice, too, how the truth of this text is revealed in race relations. Slavery in America was perpetuated not merely by human badness but also by human blindness. True, the causal basis for the system of slavery must to a large extent be traced back to the economic factor. Men convinced themselves that a system which was so economically profitable must be morally justifiable. They formulated elaborate theories of racial superiority. Their rationalizations clothed obvious wrongs in the beautiful garments of righteousness. This tragic attempt to give moral sanction to an economically profitable system gave birth to the doctrine of white supremacy. Religion and the Bible were cited to crystallize the status quo. Science was commandeered to prove the biological inferiority of the Negro. Even philosophical logic was manipulated to give intellectual credence to the system of slavery. Someone formulated the argument of the inferiority of

the Negro according to the framework of an Aristotelian syllogism:

All men are made in the image of God;
God, as everyone knows, is not a Negro;
Therefore, the Negro is not a man.

So men conveniently twisted the insights of religion, science, and philosophy to give sanction to the doctrine of white supremacy. Soon this idea was embedded in every textbook and preached in practically every pulpit. It became a structured part of the culture. And men then embraced this philosophy, not as the rationalization of a lie, but as the expression of a final truth. They sincerely came to believe that the Negro was inferior by nature and that slavery was ordained by God. In 1857, the system of slavery was given its greatest legal support by the deliberations of the Supreme Court of the United States in the Dred Scott decision. The Court affirmed that the Negro had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. The justices who rendered this decision were not wicked men. On the contrary, they were decent and dedicated men. But they were victims of spiritual and intellectual blindness. They knew not what they did. The whole system of slavery was largely perpetuated by sincere though spiritually ignorant persons.

This tragic blindness is also found in racial segregation, the not-too-distant cousin of slavery. Some of the most vigorous defenders of segregation are sincere in their beliefs and earnest in their motives. Although some men are segregationists merely for reasons of political expediency and economic gain, not all of the resistance to integration is the rear-guard of professional bigots. Some people feel that their attempt to preserve segregation is best for themselves, their children, and their nation. Many are good church people, anchored in the religious faith of their mothers and fathers. Pressed for a

religious vindication for their conviction, they will even argue that God was the first segregationist. "Red birds and blue birds don't fly together," they contend. Their views about segregation, they insist, can be rationally explained and morally justified. Pressed for a justification of their belief in the inferiority of the Negro, they turn to some pseudo-scientific writing and argue that the Negro's brain is smaller than the white man's brain They do not know, or they refuse to know, that the idea of an inferior or superior race has been refuted by the best evidence of the science of anthropology. Great anthropologists, like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville J. Herskovits, agree that, although there may be inferior and superior individuals within all races, there is no superior or inferior race. And segregationists refuse to acknowledge that science has demonstrated that there are four types of blood and these four types are found within every racial group. They blindly believe in the eternal validity of an evil called segregation and the timeless truth of a myth called white supremacy. What a tragedy! Millions of Negroes have been crucified by conscientious blindness. With Jesus on the cross, we must look lovingly at our oppressors and say, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

III.

From all that I have attempted to say it should now be apparent that sincerity and conscientiousness in themselves are not enough. History has proven that these noble virtues may degenerate into tragic vices. Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. Shakespeare wrote:

> For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

As the chief moral guardian of the community, the church must implore men to be good and well-intentioned and must extol the virtues of kindheartedness and conscientiousness. But somewhere along the way the church must remind men that devoid of intelligence, goodness and conscientiousness will become brutal forces leading to shameful crucifixions. Never must the church tire of reminding men that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent.

Must we not admit that the church has often overlooked this moral demand for enlightenment? At times it has talked as though ignorance were a virtue and intelligence a crime. Through its obscurantism, closedmindedness, and obstinacy to new truth, the church has often unconsciously encouraged its worshipers to look askance upon intelligence. But if we are to call ourselves Christians, we had better avoid intellectual and moral blindness. Throughout the New Testament we are reminded of the need for enlightenment. We are commanded to love God, not only with our hearts and souls, but also with our minds. When the Apostle Paul noticed the blindness of many of his opponents, he said, "I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." Over and again the Bible reminds us of the danger of zeal without knowledge and sincerity without intelligence.

So we have a mandate both to conquer sin and also to conquer ignorance. Modern man is presently having a rendezvous with chaos, not merely because of human badness, but also because of human stupidity. If Western civilization continues to degenerate until it, like twenty-four of its predecessors, falls hopelessly into a bottomless void, the cause will be not only its undeniable sinfulness, but also its appalling blindness. And if American

democracy gradually disintegrates, it will be due as much to a lack of insight as to a lack of commitment to right. If modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war and eventually transforms his earthly habitat into an inferno such as even the mind of Dante could not imagine, it will have resulted from downright badness and also from downright stupidity.

"They know not what they do," said Jesus. Blindness was their besetting trouble. And the crux of the matter lies here: we do need to be blind. Unlike physical blindness that is usually inflicted upon individuals as a result of natural forces beyond their control, intellectual and moral blindness is a dilemma which man inflicts upon himself by his tragic misuse of freedom and his failure to use his mind to its fullest capacity. One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong. Only through the bringing together of head and heart—intelligence and goodness—shall man rise to a fulfillment of his true nature. Neither is this to say that one must be a philosopher or a possessor of extensive academic training before he can achieve the good life. I know many people of limited formal training who have amazing Intelligence and foresight. The call for intelligence is a call for open-mindedness~ sound judgment, and love for truth. It is a call for men to rise above the stagnation of closedmindedness and the paralysis of gullibility. One does not need to be a profound scholar to be open-minded, nor a keen academician to engage in an assiduous pursuit for truth.

Light has come into the world. A voice crying through the vista of time calls men to walk in the light. Man's earthly life will become a tragic cosmic elegy if he fails to heed this call. "This is the condemnation," says John, "that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light."

Jesus was right about those men who crucified him. They knew not what they did. They were inflicted with a terrible blindness.

Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am re minded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of unswerving devotion to truth. It causes me to say with John Bowring:

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

It would be wonderful were I to look at the cross and sense only such a sublime reaction. But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that cross without also realizing that it symbolizes a strange mixture of greatness and smallness, of good and evil. As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but of man at his worst.

We must see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness. But in the midst of this glowing affirmation, let us never forget that our Lord and Master was nailed to that cross because of human blindness. Those who crucified him knew not what they did.

BEST SERMONS 1[116]

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

Scripture: Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18

A FEW YEARS AGO I flew out to Madison, Wisconsin, to see our oldest son wrestle in a college tournament. On my way back, two Sikhs, men from northern India, with their heads in turbans, sat down beside me. We had a pleasant conversation, but I didn't force my beliefs on them. I helped the older man next to me with his dinner tray, and I told him about a friend I had from India. I told him the bishop of South India had visited the Princeton campus. Our professor had asked us to be friend him, because his wife had died a tragic death, and he was very lonely. I baked him some cake and took it to him, and he invited my husband and me to his home for an Indian meal. As I told my neighbor on the plane this story, he seemed to have tears in his eyes. Then he went to sleep. As we neared Newark Airport, he opened his eyes and turned to me and said, "Tell me about Jesus Christ." What would you have said? Jesus Christ?[117]

I'd like to suggest that there are three ways we can answer this question: a general answer to the question "Who do people say Jesus

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[116] Kathleen Crane, "Who Is Jesus Christ" in James W. Cox, ed., and Kenneth M. Cox, Associate editor, Best Sermons 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), pp. 29-35.

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is?"; a specific, personal answer to the question "Who do you say Jesus is?"; and a corporate answer to the question "Who does the church say Jesus Christ is?"

Who do people say Jesus is? A prophet, along with Mohammed and others, a Jewish leader in his time, someone who did good deeds, a great teacher, the greatest man who ever lived. Some people see a man of action, a mystic, a revolutionary, a liberator, or a great moral leader.

A few years ago Alexander Solzhenitsyn received the Templeton Award—religion's equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize. He warned that people have forgotten God. He said, "In the Soviet bloc, hatred of religion is the driving force of Communism, and the West is in decline because the meaning of life is reduced to the pursuit of happiness." He is saying that under Marxist philosophy, Jesus is someone to hate and oppose. By contrast, in the West, Jesus is someone to deny or ignore.

When Jesus asked this question his time was short. Was there anyone who recognized him for who he was? Would there be anyone to carry on his work after he was gone? This problem involved the survival of the Christian faith. He wanted to know before he set out for Jerusalem whether anyone understood. He didn't ask the question directly, he led up to it. He first asked, Who do people say that I am? They replied: some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others,Jeremiah or one of the prophets. John the Baptist was a great figure—Herod Antipas feared that he might even return from the dead. Elijah and Jeremiah were among the greatest of the prophets. They thought they were putting him in the highest categories they could find. The Jews believed that the voice of

prophecy had been silent for 400 years; they were saying that in Jesus, people heard again the direct and authentic voice of God. These were high tributes, but not high enough. Human categories, even the highest, are inadequate to describe him.

Jesus wasn't content with the people's answers of John, Elijah, or Jeremiah. Those answers implied that there were precedents and parallels. Jesus claimed to be unique. A Roman emperor had a statue of Jesus and a statue of Plato side by side in his pantheon. He thought he was paying Jesus a noble tribute. He was, but that was not the gospel.

Jesus asked right away, Who do you say that I am? He moved the impersonal discussion to a personal challenge. History forces this question upon us. Jesus has affected people in a far greater sense than Julius Caesar or Alexander or Napoleon ever did—who can he be? The Bible forces it upon is: a carpenter apprentice made claims such as "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." Who can he be? Conscience forces it upon us. This Jesus of Nazareth, whose words still pierce us like a sword, whose eyes still haunt us, whose loving, accepting way is so attractive— who can he be?

This question is for all of us, children, youth, and adults. Who is Jesus Christ? It is the most important question any of us will ever answer. It is also a question we need to answer more than once. We need to respond to it as children, as youth, and many times as adults. For we want our faith (and our relation ship to Christ) to be a dynamic, living reality, not just a memory.

Maybe you've heard the expression "God had no

grandchildren—there are only children of God." Christianity is always one generation from extinction. This points up the importance of Christian education. Every time you agree to teach a class, or pray as a family before a meal, or at bedtime with your children, you help keep the Christian faith alive. We don't become Christians automatically because our parents are Christians. God calls each generation to say yes—to respond to his gift of grace.

Would you describe Jesus as a person of the past, or as someone in the present? On Easter I said, "The Lord is risen!" and you replied, "He is risen indeed!" Is that a general statement, or a personal answer? Is he alive to you? This passage of scripture teaches that our discovery of Jesus Christ must be a personal discovery. You could know all about the life and teachings of Christ, even know what all great thinkers and theologians have said about Christ, and still not be a Christian. Being a Christian is more than knowing about Jesus; it involves knowing Jesus.

This question should be on the wall of every church: "Who do you say that I am?" This question and answer are the most important conversation in Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus was dissatisfied with the general answers, so he asked his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" This question had never been asked before. Through all the months of training and fellowship with these men, Jesus had been leading up to this question. The future of his work depended upon their answer. As the question was asked, there must have been a moment of silence. These men faced the question about the ultimate mystery of the being of God. Suddenly, Peter

responded, in his impetuous, loving way—you are the Christ, the son of the living God! This answer by Peter affirms two great truths about Jesus: his sonship and his Messiahship.

The Resurrection helped many people to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. In all four Gospels, Jesus is called the Son of God. But Peter made this statement before the Resurrection!

To say that Jesus is the Christ is to say that he was the promised Messiah, the suffering servant described in the Isaiah passage. *Messiah is* the Hebrew word for *anointed.* The word *Christos* in the Greek, from which we get the word *Christ,* also means *anointed.* It is more accurate to say, Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one, the promised Messiah.

Is the idea of a Messiah relevant today? Was it just a Jewish idea for those times? What does *Messiah* mean to us? To them, it meant that someone was coming who would be the hope of the world, the fulfillment of every promise, and the answer to every prayer: one who would straighten out all human troubles, right all earthly wrongs, and bring in the Kingdom of God. That was the idea, and it hasn't lost its meaning—it has more meaning now than ever!

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God! How could Peter say that? Something had happened to Peter that he hadn't dare put into words until now. He began to feel toward Jesus the way he felt toward God. When Jesus asked Peter to follow him, Peter didn't realize at first who he was following. He just knew Jesus was someone he wanted to follow, and Jesus accepted him at that very elementary level of faith. It was enough for a beginning. Jesus accepted people where they were,

not demanding full belief at once, but allowing faith to grow and mature. Peter watched Jesus speak with authority. He saw how he touched people's lives and changed them. Peter also noticed how Jesus was affecting him: he was being changed. Jesus did for him what only God could do. He had to confess it—"You are the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of the living God!"

In the last resort, however, Peter's knowledge of Jesus (and ours) comes as a revelation from God. Jesus said, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven." Peter could say with conviction: "I know." Only God can make us finally sure of God.

Jesus gives us a focus for understanding who God is; it is hard to visualize or understand a Spirit. In the confirmation class, we viewed part of the *movie Jesus of Nazareth,* and we were helped in our understanding. Jesus gives us a *human vision* of God.

Who does the church say Jesus Christ is? What or who is the church? I believe the church is an extension of the Incarnation. We usually understand Incarnation to describe Jesus as God in human form. The church is often defined as the "body of Christ." We represent Jesus to the world through this body, the church. How well do we represent Jesus Christ?

Let me share a story I once heard. Some people came up to God and said, "Who are you, how can we know who you are?" God pointed to his church and said, "This is who I am."

Who is it we represent? In viewing the *movie Jesus of Nazareth,* three things impressed me about Jesus. First, how accepting he was of

all people. He didn't condemn the woman caught in adultery; he forgave her. Second, he showed compassion for people in need, and just one example was his healing of a blind man. Third, he was willing to follow God's will. Those would be good guides for any church: be accepting, show compassion, and seek to follow God's will.

You may know the song, "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together." The church is people. I heard Willard Heckel speak a couple of years ago. He was Dean of the Rutgers Law School and a former moderator of our national church. He said he was complaining about the problems in the world and the church, and his whole life was changed when a woman challenged him with this question: "What are you doing about it?" God wants to use us, his people, to change the world.

Because Jesus is God and is alive, he has the power to change the lives of people like you and like me. When I was in the Kendall Park Presbyterian Church, I made many calls on new residents to welcome them to the community and invite them to church. I'd like to share one story with you. One time I called on a woman who was Roman Catholic; her husband had no church affiliation. I asked her if she worshiped any where. She said she didn't, and the Catholic faith wasn't meaningful to her anymore, and she wanted to go to church again. I invited her to come to our church. She and her husband and their children all came and they became active members of the church. A few years ago, her husband, Richard Bennett, was killed in a car accident. It was hard on all of us in the church— he was in his forties, and he left a wife and three daughters.

At the funeral, the pastor said, "Richard Bennett grew up in the Bronx, and he had a tough early life. He soon learned to use his fists in the streets, and he had some ability in this area, which he developed into an amateur boxing career of thirty plus fights. At that time, his relationship to God and the church was virtually nil. Four years ago, he and his family came to Kendall Park, and they began coming to our church. Rick never had one moment when he suddenly believed, but he had a gradual awareness of the love of God for him, and he began to invite others to come to church. He was denied a quantity of life in years, but he found a quality in the few years he had with us." The next day I went to see his widow, Maria. I took her a white mum plant, and I told her I chose white because of the Resurrection. She said, "Oh, that's my hope!" I said, "It's a sure hope, because it's a promise we have from the risen Christ."Just then she looked at me and said, "Because of you, he found Christ!" We hugged each other and cried, and I'll never forget it!

The story doesn't end there. A seminary student from Kenya named Wilson Lang'at came to our church. One of his needs was to have his wife and child join him while he was studying. Maria Bennett agreed to give part of the memorial fund to Wilson, to bring his family over. One day I had lunch with Wilson, and I said we were connected in a way, and I shared this story with him. He was happy to hear it, and said that when he finished school and went back to Kenya, he would tell the people there this story.

We are part of the church, and God really can work through each one of us to make a difference.

Finally, I can't answer for you; I just raise the question. I will say that my faith, my relationship with Jesus Christ, is the most important thing in my life. Who is Jesus Christ to you?

THE NEW BEING[118]

"WHAT IS TRUTH?"

Paul Tillich

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; . . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

JOHN 1:14, 17.

Why do you not understand what I say? . . . you are of your father the devil.... He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

JOHN 8:43, 44

Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?'" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, What is truth?'

JOHN 18:37, 38.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

JOHN 14:6.

*He who does what * true, comes to the light.*

JOHN 3:21

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you ....the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

JOHN 14:16, 17.

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

JOHN 16: 13.

Let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.

I JOHN 4:7, 8

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[118] Paul Tillich, "What Is Truth?" in The New Being (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955) pp. 63-74.

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in Him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

JOHN 8:31, 32

IN THE ABOVE PASSAGES THERE ARE words in which Jesus speaks about truth. Another of these words shall be the center of our meditation, the word in which He combines truth and freedom: "The truth will make you free."

The question of truth is universally human; but like everything human it was first manifest on a special place in a special group. It was the Greek mind in which the passionate search for truth was most conspicuous; and it was the Greek world in which, and to which, the Gospel of John was written. The words, here said by Jesus, are, according to ancient custom, put into His mouth by the evangelist who wanted to show the answer of Christianity to the central question of the Hellenic mind: the question of truth. The answer is given also to us, for we, too, ask the question of truth. *And some* of us ask it as passionately, and sometimes as desperately, as the Greeks did.

It is often at an early age that we are moved by the desire for truth. When I, myself, as a fifteen-year-old boy received the words of our text as the motto for my future life from the confirming minister, who happened to be my father, I felt that this was just what I was looking for; and I remember that I was not alone in my group with this longing for truth. But I also observed, in myself and in others, that the early passion for truth is due to be lost in the adolescent and adult years of our lives. How does this happen?

The truth the child first receives is imposed upon him by adults, predominantly by his parents. This cannot be otherwise; and he cannot help accepting it. The passion for truth is silenced by answers which have the weight

of undisputed authority, be it that of the mother or the father, or an older friend, or a gang, or the representatives of a social pattern. But sooner or later the child revolts against the truth given to him. He denies the authorities either all together, or one in the name of the other. He uses the teachers against the parent. He uses the gang against the teachers, a friend against the gang. The gang against society and society against the friend.

This revolt is as unavoidable as was his early dependence on authority. The authorities gave him strength to live on, the revolt makes him responsible for truth he accepts or rejects.

But whether in obedience or in revolt, the time comes, when a new way to truth is opened to us, especially to those in academic surroundings: The way of scholarly work. Eagerly we take it. It seems so safe, so successful~ so independent of both authority and willfulness. It liberates from prejudices and superstitions; it makes us humble and honest. Where else, besides in scholarly work, should we look for truth? There are many in our period, young and old, primitive and sophisticated, practical and scientific, who accept this answer without hesitation. For them scholarly truth is truth altogether. Poetry may give beauty, but it certainly does not give truth. Ethics may help us to a good life, but it cannot help us to truth. Religion may produce deep emotions, but it should not claim to have truth. Only science gives us truth. It gives us new insights into the way nature works, into the texture of human history, into the hidden things of the human mind. It gives a feeling of joy, inferior to no other joy. He who has experienced this transition from darkness, or dimness, to the sharp light of knowledge will always praise scientific truth and understanding and say with some great medieval theologians, that the principles through which we know

our world are the eternal divine light in our souls. And yet, when we ask those who have their studies in our colleges and universities whether they have found there a truth which is relevant lives they will answer with hesitation. Some that they have lost what they had of relevant truth; others will say that they don't care for such a truth because life goes on from day to day without it. Will tell you of a person, a book, an event out their studies which gave them the feeling of a truth that matters. But they all will agree that it is not scholarly work which can give truth relevant for our life.

Where else, then, can we get it? "Nowhere," Pilate, answers in his talk with Jesus. "What is truth?" he asks, expressing in these three words his own and his contemporaries' despair of truth, expressing also the despair of truth in millions of our contemporaries, in schools and studios, in business and professions. In all of us, open or hidden, admitted or repressed, the despair of truth is a permanent threat. We are children of our period as Pilate was. Both are periods of disintegration, of a world-wide loss of values and meanings. No body can separate himself completely from this reality~ and nobody should even try. Let me do something unusual from a Christian standpoint, namely, to express praise of Pilate—not the unjust judge, but the cynic and skeptic; and of an those amongst us in whom Pilate's question is alive. For in the depth of every serious doubt and every despair of truth, the passion for truth is still at work. Don't give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth. Don't be seduced into a truth which is not really your truth, even if the seducer is your church, or your party, or your parental tradition. Go with Pilate, if you cannot go with Jesus; but go in seriousness with him!

Twofold are the temptations to evade the burden of asking for the truth

that matters. The one is the way of those who claim to have the truth and the other is the way of those who do not care for the truth. The first ones are called "the Jews" in our gospel. They point to their tradition which goes back to Abraham. Abraham is their father; so they have all truth, and do not need to be worried by the question which they encounter in Jesus. Many among us, Christians and secularists, are "Jews" in the sense of the Fourth Gospel. They point to *their* tradition which goes back to the Church Fathers, or to the popes, or to the Reformers, or to the makers of the American Constitution. Their church or their nation is their mother, so they have all truth and do not need to worry about the question of truth. Would Jesus tell them, perhaps, what He told the Jews—that even if the church or the nation is their mother, they carry with them the heritage of the father of untruth; that the truth they have is not the truth which makes free? Certainly there is no freedom where there is self complacency about the truth of one's own beliefs. There is no freedom where there is ignorant and fanatical rejection of foreign ideas and ways of life. There is not freedom but demonic bondage where one's own truth is called the ultimate truth. For this is an attempt to be like God, an attempt which is made in the name of God.

There is the second way of avoiding the question of truth—the way of not caring for it, of indifference. It is the way of the majority of the people today, as well as at the time of Jesus. Life, they say to themselves, is a mixture of truth, half-truth and falsehood. It is quite possible to live with his mixture, to muddle through most of the difficulties of life without asking the question of a truth that matters ultimately. There may be boundary situations, a tragic event, a deep spiritual fall, death. But as long as they are far removed, the question of truth can also stay far away. Hence, the common attitude—a little bit of Pilate's

skepticism, especially in things which it is not dangerous today to doubt, as, for instance, God and the Christ; and a little bit of the Jew's dogmatism, especially in things which one is re quested to accept today, as, for instance, an economic or political way of life. In other words, some skepticism and some dogmatism, and a shrewd method of balancing them liberate one from the burden of asking the question of ultimate truth.

But those of us who dare to face the question of truth may listen to what the Fourth Gospel says about it. The first thing which strikes us is that the truth of which Jesus speaks is not a doctrine but a reality, namely, He Himself: *"I am* the truth." This is a profound transformation of the ordinary meaning of truth. For us, statements are true or false; people may *have* truth or not; but how can they *be* truth, even *the* truth? The truth of which the Fourth Gospel speaks is a true reality—that reality which does not deceive us if we accept it and live with it. If Jesus says, "I am the truth," he indicates that in Him the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present; or, in other words, that God is present, unveiled, undistorted, in His infinite depth, in His unapproachable mystery. Jesus is not the truth because His teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is. He is more than His words. And He is more than any word said about Him. The truth which makes us free is neither the teaching of Jesus nor the teaching about Jesus. Those who have called the teaching of Jesus "the truth" have subjected the people to a servitude under the law. And most people like to live under a law. They want to be told what to think and what not to think. And they accept Jesus as the infallible teacher and giver of a new law. But even the words of Jesus, if taken as a law, are not the truth which makes us free. And they should not be used as such by our scholars and

preachers and religious teachers. They should not be used as a collection of infallible prescriptions for life and thought. They *point* to the truth, but they are not a law of truth. Nor are the doctrines about Him the truth that liberates. I say this to you as some body who all his life has worked for a true expression of the truth which is the Christ. But the more one works, the more one realizes that our expressions, including everything we have learned from our teachers and from the teaching of the Church in all generations, is not the truth that makes us free. The Church very early forgot the word of our Gospel that He is the truth; and claimed that her doctrines about Him are the truth. But these doctrines, however necessary and good they were, proved to be not the truth that liberates. Soon they became tools of suppression, of servitude under authorities; they became means to prevent the honest search for truth—weapons to split the souls of people between loyalty to the Church and sincerity to truth. And in this way they gave deadly weapons to those who attacked the Church and its doctrines in the name of truth. Not everybody feels this conflict. There are masses of people who feel safe under doctrinal laws. They are safe, but it is the safety of him who has not yet found his spiritual freedom, who has not yet found his true self. It is the dignity and the danger of Protestantism that it exposes its adherents to the insecurity of asking the question of truth for themselves and that it throws them into the freedom and responsibility of personal decisions, of the right to choose between the ways of the skeptics, and those who are orthodox, of the indifferent masses, and Him who is the truth that liberates. For this is the greatness of Protestantism: that it points beyond the teachings of Jesus and beyond the doctrines of the Church to the being of Him whose being is the truth.

How do we reach this truth? "By doing it," is the answer of the Fourth

Gospel. This does not mean being obedient to the commandments, accepting them and fulfilling them. Doing the truth means living out of the reality which is *He* who is the truth, making His being the being of ourselves and of our world. And again, we ask, "How can this happen?" "By remaining in Him" is the answer of the Fourth Gospel, *i.e.,* by participating in His being. "Abide in me and I in you," he says. The truth which liberates is the truth in which we participate, which is a part of us and we a part of it. True discipleship is participation. If the real, the ultimate, the divine reality which is His being becomes our being we are in the truth that matters.

And a third time we ask, "How can this happen?" There is an answer to this question in our Gospel which may deeply shock us: "Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Being "of the truth" means, coming from the true, the ultimate reality, being determined in one's being by the divine ground of an being, by that reality which is present in the Christ. If we have part in it, we recognize it wherever it appears; we recognize it as it appears in its fullness in the Christ. But, some may ask in despair: "If we have *no* part in it, if we are *not* of the truth, are we then forever excluded from it? Must we accept a life without truth, a life in error and meaninglessness? Who tells me that I am of the truth, that I have a chance to reach it?" Nobody can tell you; but there is one criterion: If you *seriously* ask the question, "Am I of the truth?" you *are* of the truth. If you do not ask it seriously, you do not really want, and you do not deserve, and you cannot get, an answer! He who asks seriously the question of the truth that liberates, is already on his way to liberation. He may still be in the bondage of dogmatic self assurance but he has begun to be free from it. He may still be in the bondage of cynical despair, but he has already started to emerge from it. He

may still be in the bondage of unconcern about the truth that matters, but his unconcern is already shaken. These all are of the truth and on their road to the truth.

On this road you will meet the liberating truth in many forms except in one form: you never will meet it in the form of propositions which you can learn or write down and take home. But you may encounter it in one sentence of a book or of a conversation or of a lecture, or even of a sermon. This sentence is not the truth, but it may open you up for the truth and it may liberate you from the bondage to opinions and prejudices and conventions. Suddenly, true reality appears like the brightness of lightening in a formerly dark place. Or, slowly, true reality appears like a landscape when the fog becomes thinner and thinner and finally disappears. New darknesses, new fogs will fall upon you; but you have experienced, at least once, the truth and the freedom given by the truth. Or you may be grasped by the truth in an encounter with a piece of nature— its beauty and its transitoriness; or in an encounter with a human being in friendship and estrangement, in love, in difference and hate; or in an encounter with your self in a sudden insight into the hidden strivings of your soul, in disgust and even hatred of yourself, in reconciliation with and acceptance of yourself. In these en counters you may meet the true reality—the truth which liberates from illusions and false authorities, from en slaving anxieties, desires and hostilities, from a wrong self-rejection and a wrong self-affirmation.

And it may even happen that you are grasped by the picture and power of Him who is truth. There is no law that this must happen. Many at all times and in all places have encountered the true reality which is in Him without knowing His name—as He Himself said. They were of the truth and they recognized the

truth, although they had never seen Him who is the truth. And those who have seen Him, the Christians in all generations~ have no guarantee that they participate in the truth which He is. Maybe they were not of the truth Those, however, who are of the truth and who have encountered Him who is the truth have one precious thing beyond the others: They have the point, from which to judge all truth they encounter anywhere They look at a life which never lost the communion with the divine ground of all life, and they took at a life which never lost the union of love with all beings.

And this leads to the last word which the man who has written the Gospel and the Letters of John has to say about truth: that the truth which liberates is the power of love, for God is love. The father of the lie binds us to himself by binding us to ourselves—or to that in us which is not our true self. Love liberates from the father of the lie because it liberates us from our false self to our true self—to that self which is grounded in true reality. Therefore, distrust every claim for truth where you do not see truth united with love; and be certain that you are of the truth and that the truth has taken hold of you only when love has taken hold of you and has started to make you free from yourselves.

DON'T BLAME IT ON JESUS![119]

(Judges 19:1-29)

There are some sermons which are easier to preach than others; some subjects which are easier to broach than others. On the days when I can preach one of "those," I am happy. I welcome the opportunity.

But there are other subjects and issues which are more difficult to approach. To be sure, it is a truism of the Christian ministry that often times we do not deal with the issues that confront all of us every day. They are threatening; they cause us to open wounds in ourselves and in our hearers. Many white ministers, for example, will not talk about racism and how evil it is and how anti-Biblical it is. White pastors want to keep their jobs, keep the money coming in, and to talk about racism, to let their people know that they run the dangerous risk of cutting themselves off from the kingdom of God because of their racism, is too risky for them. And so they don't talk about it. They act like it's a social ill whose address is not proper from a Christian pulpit. Many cannot do it because of their own racism. They feel Biblically justified in feeling the way they do and so they cannot preach its evilness. But many others do not preach it simply because it is an uncomfortable subject for them. The net effect is that many white Christians end up feeling no compunction at all for their racist ideas and practices. In fact, they feel a tacit, implicit base of support from the pulpit. Jesus is not preached, not his message that abhors oppression. That is too risky.

We have an unfortunate situation brewing as concerns abortion. We

[119] Susan K. Smith, "Don't Blame It On Jesus."

have two camps: one camp which uses Jesus as the justification for calling women getting abortions "murderers" and for blocking the entrance to abortion clinics, and another camp which is virtually silent, not calling on Jesus at all. The opponents of abortion have audibly been secular. It's too risky to take a stand for some pastors. I have trembled myself on the issue, because nobody likes to be drawn and quartered for their theological beliefs. When a prospective member questioned me on my stand on abortion one day, I was scared to answer because I didn't know what the outcome would be. But I had to tell the truth, and if he had decided not to join, then I had to take that. For the record, I believe in freedom of choice. I don't presume to know God's position on abortion, I only know that I don't believe it is the place of government to tell me or any woman whether or not or when to have children. The government will not pay for any child which I cannot afford. The government will not adopt any child that I cannot love and provide for. The government will not give me or pay for the psychological support I may need as the result of having a child from a rape experience. I believe that there is but one God, and He lives in heaven, not in Washington D.C. I realize that as I say this, I may be losing some members, but I have to say those things ... those uncomfortable things.

Many Roman Catholics do not believe that having a hundred children is healthy, but they won't speak out because it's too risky. Martin Luther is a prime example of what happens when you follow your conscience, when you preach what the Scriptures compel you to preach and when you do not ignore things which are true and unjust. Father George Stallings in Washington D.C. has been excommunicated for preaching and practicing what his soul tells him is right, as pertains reaching the African American Roman Catholics who cannot

relate to the Eurocentric message of the Roman Church. There is a price to pay for speaking out and saying the uncomfortable things. There are all kinds of issues which pastors will not talk about from the pulpit, and too many Scriptures which pastors will ignore either because they are too risky to mention or because the pastor has not dealt with his or her own feelings about them. What many Christians want is pablum on Sunday mornings. They don't want to struggle or hear the truth; that's why white folks don't want to hear about racism. The truth is, there are many painful and troubling passages in the Bible which many of us have read and are disturbed about. When we don't hear those passages talked about, if we're in a place where we have lots of questions and even more doubts, our faith suffers and Jesus often gets the blame.

Take the passages of Paul, as pertains to slaves. I cannot read those passages even today without *wincing,* but as a pastor, I am compelled to read them and meditate on them and study them and research them and then present them to you so that you understand their context and implications for you today. I have to do that, though I hate reading them. If I don't do that, you'll blame Jesus for something that wasn't his fault. I have to deal with those passages.

And then there are the passages dealing with women.

I try to stay away from those passages in the pulpit because I hate, overall, the way women have been treated in the Scriptures, and I hate the way those passages have been twisted by a male dominated society to keep women "in their place."

But as I look around here, at Advent, what I see is a predominantly female congregation (as is the case in ALL churches!), a population of believers

who are thirsty for the truth, who have needs, and who need to be empowered. If we declare that we are unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian, the only way to make the second part of that declaration fully true is to also acknowledge that we are undeniably female and as such are entitled to the gifts of the kingdom. We have been taught, though, that we have a certain place in this world and in the church, and as a result, we have not felt our true potential and many of us have come to have serious problems with Christianity and with Jesus. Many of the reasons and/or justifications for the way we are treated has come from the Bible itself and the way we are treated there; I will deal with one such story in a moment, but let me first run some things past you.

I remember when Jeremiah Wright preached at my installation, he was telling the story about how he was in an airplane one day, ready to fly somewhere. Dr. Wright is one who has been extremely supportive of women and their rightful place in the ministry. It was he, as a matter of fact, who warned me that most of my opposition, as I candidated for a church, would come not from the men, but from the women. And it's true. Many women have incredible prejudices against women pastors. They cannot believe, some of them, when I go to churches, that I am the speaker for the day. Women and men, but mostly the women, want you, if you just have to insist that you are called, to look like a minister, i.e., wear a gray or brown suit with a blouse that has a ruffled, turtle neck; let your skirt reach down to below your calf, and wear some Dr. Scholls shoes. They don't want you to wear make up; that makes you a hussy. They don't want you to be a woman. If you are single, they want you to sit at home. Never mind if they try to fix brother pastor up with every woman in the city. If you're a woman, you're supposed to be home. If you go out with Joe one day

and Mark two days later, the phone wires will burn with the news of their "loose" pastor. While many women will prepare dinner for their male pastor every week -- they will fight for who gets to do it next, if you're a woman, you'd better know that after service, you've got to go on home and fix your family something to eat. Renita Weems put it this way: male pastors have been religiously seduced by their parishioners. The little women will bake sweet potato pies and fry chicken and take it to Pastor's office and in exchange, they can get what they want.

That doesn't work with another women. We are the same hormones. We know how that works. So women regard a woman pastor differently, and have to spend time devising other ways to get over. Women have little regard or respect for their women pastors, at least not at first. I remember being told one time, when I had asked that something not be done unless I knew about it, the response which came from another woman, was that, (I.) "I don't have to ask her anything!" and (2), "She's never been a pastor before, so she don't know any more than I do." She wouldn't have said that about a man.

The men? Well, men in the churches try to hang, but men in the pastorate have a real hard time. I was asking Keith Troy the other day if a woman has ever been invited to preach in this city's simultaneous revival, and he just gave me one of those "now you know" looks. Many men will not allow female pastors to sit in their pulpits. Many men will in one breath tell you that their mamas taught them everything they know, like the Rev. E.V. Hill in Los Angeles, but in the next breath will say that God did not call women; God said women had to be quiet.

The sad thing about all of this is that the prejudices are said to be Biblically based. What I believe is that in many instances, the prejudices are Biblically ingrained, just like the attitudes of racism are. I say "Biblically"

because of the way things are presented in the Bible. That is not to say that GOD ordained that the opinions and attitudes are just. I want to give you a very painful example of what I'm talking about.

There was a Levite who with his concubine, was making a journey, and, in a remote area of Ephraim, they were met by an old man who had compassion on them and invited them to his house. He really appeared to be the nicest man; they needed food and shelter and he graciously met their needs. Israel at that time was full of corruption, and so it is no surprise that some time that night, a group of men who knew the old man had visitors, one of whom was a fine young man, banged on his door, threatening to break in, so they could have sexual intercourse with the man. Homosexuality was pervasive at this time in Israel's history, and so the demand is not all that surprising.

But the old man abhorred homosexuality. He knew how traumatic it would be for the man. And so this man did something which is totally disgusting.

"Don't take this man," he said. "Don't do anything that vile. I can help you, if you just leave him alone. I have a virgin daughter and my guest's concubine. If you just have to have sex tonight, I'll bring you both of them and you can do to them what you wish . "

I would imagine that the two women were fine; but they didn't have to be. If someone is in a raping mood, you can look like Sin Revisited and it won't matter. The men outside, though, didn't want the two women. They wanted that man. And so the old man, wanting to protect his honored Levite guest, actually took his concubine outside and gave her to the men. He would have taken his virgin daughter -- his own flesh and blood -- if the men had pressed. But they didn't. They took the concubine and they raped her, not once but over and over

and over again. All night long, they abused her and ravished her. At dawn, they were through. They left, full and satisfied, and there she lay ... the image is horrible. She somehow got back to the house where her master was staying with the old man and his virgin daughter, and fell at the door. She just lay there until her master awoke. When he got up and found her, he looked down on her with contempt. Now she was of no use to him. She was too used. Mind you, this was a Levite, a religious man, one who knew Yahweh and supposedly followed the Law. But he was a human being who often left God out of his personal prejudices, with the knowledge that God would not condone his human behavior. So in his humanness, he talked to her like she was dirt. "Get up. Let's go." But the girl was almost dead. She could not answer. And so he picked her up and put her on his donkey and took her to his house, where he killed her and dismembered her. A Levite.

Now see, that story is painful. It's painful to read and it's painful to hear. But I really think we have to deal with stories like that because I think some people use that story and stories like it as justification for their behavior. They say that GOD wrote the Bible, therefore, God was giving instructions. That's a lie. They say that GOD condoned the treatment of women in that way, therefore, it's OK to treat women like this now. You have to understand that GOD did not write the Bible, men did, and in many instances, in sexual and racial matters, the stories were written in a self-serving way to justify human behavior.

But what's most important for me today to stress is, that in spite of these messages, the preached ones and the religious behavior which has been influenced by these stories, women have to be careful not to inhale the message of nothingness and worthlessness that the stories and behaviors

suggest. We have to be careful and KNOW the Word; know what Jesus said and what men who wrote the Bible said. We have to keep our bottom lines intact, and that is that there is a JESUS who preached mercy, empowerment and NO OPPRESSION to anyone. We have a Jesus who preached and taught that in his father's eyes, there were no Jews or gentiles, no slave and no free, no male and no female, no black and no white, no superior and inferior, but that we were and are ALL precious in his sight. We have a Jesus who affirmed women through talking with the Samaritan woman at the well; we have a Jesus who affirmed women by caring for the woman about to be stoned for adultery, reminding the men that it does take two to tangle; we have a Jesus who affirmed one woman's quest for theological understanding and her sister's quest of or for domesticity; we have a Jesus who forgave a prostitute who washed his feet with her tears and dried those feet with her hair; we have a Jesus who affirmed the Syrophonecian woman for her superior faith, and a Jesus who affirmed a woman who dared touch the hem of his garment for healing, though the world said she was unclean; we have a Jesus who did not buy into society's opinion that a woman who had been bent over for 18 years was thus because of some sin. I hope your bottom line is intact. Don't blame Jesus for what institutionalized religion has put on him as pertains to women or to blacks. We as African Americans have to sort through the mess to get to the truth, and we as women have to do the same.

Because the bottom line is, there is a Jesus who gave everybody something to do. There is a Jesus who believes loves all the children, black, white, yellow, red, brown, male, AND female.Praise him. Praise Him for your life. Your blessings. Your strengths and your weaknesses, knowing that he can take those

weaknesses and change them. I have to do it, too. Do you know what my prayer is? To be able to preach with such conviction that people come running down this aisle asking, "What must I do to be saved?" I want people to come who think they're unworthy. Who think they're dirty. That their sins are too great, I want them. I want them because when I was like that, somebody got me. I remember when I thought I was the scum of the earth, and that man just kept preaching Jesus. And it forced me into my own separation room. And I met my guilt and shame and low self esteem and weaknesses face to face. I had to be still. God shook me and then he held me, only, I had to be still. God told me, in the midst of that separation, that I could stop the things I hated most. That I could do ALL things through him, and in my nakedness, I began to believe Him. And I've never been the same. Only, you've got to take the first step of the journey, and be still....

There is a Jesus who through God lets us know that his father is no respecter of persons, that He calls and uses whomever will come. There is a Jesus who through his relationship with God leads us to peace and to empowerment, no matter how bad it seems now. We have a Jesus, who is divine and human, who doesn't want us to hurt and suffer and accept relegation to the position of nothingness because he made us female. Don't blame Jesus!! Get your bottom line intact!!....

CHAPTER 8

THE BIBLICAL JESUS

It is no new thing, this dilemma of poor popular perceptions of Jesus. From the time of his birth, Jesus was looked upon as a blessing by some and as a curse by many others. Because of his Jewish heritage, he was deeply steeped in that tradition; yet it was the members of that very tradition which had the most difficulty in accepting him or his ministry. The first verse of the seventh chapter of the Gospel of John reads: "After these things Jesus walked in Galilee, for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him." (John 7:1, KJV)

Some today, as we have seen, criticize Jesus for what Fosdick would call his "sentimental and impractical idealism."[120] That criticism has come from the lips and hearts of African Americans in search of self-hood; from Anglo-Americans who feel their self-hood, begotten through and by aggression, threatened by this so-called admonition of gentleness; and by bigots and psychopaths like Adolph Hitler, or disenchanted theologians like Nietzsche. Hitler verbalized a criticism of Jesus and Christianity which is perhaps felt by more than we care to admit, when he said, "I regard Christianity as the most fatal and seductive lie that ever existed...[filled with] the Jewish Christ-creed with its effeminate pity ethics."[121]

Where does such a perception of Jesus come from? How is it that a fair

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[120] Harry Emerson Fosdick, Dear Mr. Brown (New York: Harper, Brothers Publishers, 1961) p. 97.

[121] Ibid, Hitler's statements are interesting in that it has been recorded that he was a "devout" Roman Catholic who went to Mass every day.

number of Christians are uneasy with what Jesus taught, fearing that his ethics pits him against the real world? Fosdick coins the question perfectly: "...what realistic relevance do such soft attitudes have to this hard, tough, violent world?"[122] A Bible class held for this document examined what we called "uncomfortable teachings" of Jesus, included in which were the Beatitudes. " Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5, KJV) caused much stirring, because of twentieth century, post-Biblical understanding of the word "meek." Again, Fosdick responds to the discomfort: When have the meek inherited the earth?

> Where are they doing it now? in Jesus' time it was the Caesars and the Herods who inherited the earth, and it has been so ever since. Well, has it? Think a moment more! Of course, one can read meanings into the word "meek" which will make nonsense of the beatitude. If we mean, Blessed are the Uriah Heeps, that is absurd. But was Jesus a Uriah Heep? Did he ever cringe and fawn? Was he passive, submissive, compliant, lacking spirit stamina, and moral indignation against wrong? Believe me, Uriah Heeps don't get crucified.[123]

Fosdick explains that the probable meaning of the beatitude, the probable meaning of the word "meek" is " teachable, " men and women with "minds open to new truth," those who are "devoted," escaping from self-centeredness; those who are "committed" to a cause of person other than their own. "In that sense," declares Fosdick, "nobody ***except*** the meek has the slightest chance of inheriting the earth."[124]

Be that as it may, it is Jesus' apparent gentle, calm, non-combative, non-aggressive demeanor that has many, black, white, rich and poor alike-disenchanted. It is peoples' perception that to believe in Jesus is to adopt a

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[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid, pp. 97-98.

[124] Ibid, p. 98.

"non-humanness," i.e, never get angry, don't have fun, ***don't*** be all that being human actually is. Where did these perceptions come from? Who is the Jesus of the Bible?

The Gospel of Luke and Jesus

From the beginning of his life, Jesus was, or stood against, the world, its laws and its normalcy. It was Jesus' transcendence, as it were, of temporal constraints and restraints, his separation from traditions both in government and religion, that angered those around him.

To be sure, poor popular perceptions of Jesus are not new.

His disfavor among at least certain elements of society is brought to life early in Luke, as a young Jesus enters the synagogue. In Luke 4:16-32, he is vividly described as entering the synagogue, reading the sacred rolls of Scripture, then sitting down to teach the rabbis. He was "gracious" according to the King James Version. He had just given them a clue as to why his teaching might be different; reading from Isaiah, he had told them that:

> "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because be hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,
>
> To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.
> (Luke 4:18,19) KJV

Here is the crux of Jesus' self-understanding of his meaning and purpose on earth. The rabbis and scribes at that point had no idea of the depth and significance of Jesus' selection of Scripture, but he did. He indicated that he knew what he was doing, the opposition he was already building, when he

recognized himself as a prophet and taught, "...I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country." (Luke 4:24)

While the Jews might not have been aware of the depth of Jesus' reading, they did hear Jesus' radical acceptance of the previously "unacceptable." They might not have realized their own spiritual poverty, their captivity to Law as opposed to God, but they ***did*** hear Jesus extending a ministry to the hated Gentiles. William Barclay notes:

> What angered the people was the apparent compliment that Jesus paid to gentiles. The Jews were so sure that they were God's people that they utterly despised all others. They believed that "God had created the gentiles to fuel the fires of hell." And here was this young Jesus whom they all knew, preaching as if the gentiles were specially favored by God. It was beginning to dawn upon them that there were things in this new message the like of which they had never dreamed.[125]

To the Christian inclined to think of Jesus as gentle to the pint of being spineless, the teacher must point out the significance of this temple experience. Jesus was quite aware of the waves he would cause; he was very aware of humans to hate that which they fear, oppose or do not understand. He was aware of the human capacity for jealousy and enmity; yet into this very human midst he went, nevertheless, courageously putting in the hands, mouths and hearts of sure enemies the first drops of fuel which would later be ignited to kill him. Far from being a "wimp," Jesus shows remarkable courage and fearlessness, shows the strength to be a non-conformist, shows that his allegiance is to God and not humans.

In sharing this illustration with students, teachers would be well - put to point out the bitter irony of Jesus' message today: that, as the Scribes and

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[125] William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, Revised Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 48.

rabbis missed Jesus' inclusive reference to them as being poor and blind and brokenhearted, so do we miss his extension of himself to ***us*** as well, as we fall into the arms of denominationalism and point fingers of all who " are not." To miss this lesson of Luke is to miss an important understanding of Jesus by the Gospel writer.

Luke vividly and carefully uncovers and reveals Jesus' capacity for anger. Yes, he was gentle, yes he preached forgiveness and love. But his work on earth was to preach the Kingdom of God, what his Father required of us all. And when he could see a direct violation or disrespect of that goal, he got angry. Consider two scriptures:

> Then he said unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offenses will come, but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into a sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. (Luke 17:1-2)

> Then in the audience of all the people he said unto his disciples, Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts; Which devour widows' houses and for a show (sic) make long prayers; the same shall receive greater damnation. (Luke 20:45-47)

On first glance, the first Scripture does at least one thing: it condemns those who lead others to sin, sin being a broken relationship between God and humans, or the loss of righteousness. That loss of righteousness makes Jesus angry; it is as though the meaning of his whole existence is ridiculed and trivialized by the human capacity to be just that - human. Remember, we have posited in this document that Jesus' task on earth was to effect reconciliation between God and his children, and between humans in relationship on earth. So, for a person purposely to lead another further from God makes Jesus' task

all the more difficult, and in ***anger*** he threatens those in question, i.e., those who are stumbling-blocks to his work.

In the second Scripture, Luke 20:45-47, Jesus pounces (in anger!) on the obvious hypocrisy of the scribes and rabbis. Rabbis were greatly trusted and respected among the people; yet Rabbis were guilty, as are ministers and clergy today, of abusing that trust. That abuse of trust has led to a great disenchantment of Jesus, but the would - be believers must understand that such behavior does not go unnoticed by God, nor will it escape punishment! Such behavior made Jesus angry then, and it makes him, and therefore God, angry now! Rabbis were full of false pride; they were to be called "master" when they walked the streets and were greeted by people. History says they "claimed rank even above parents,"[126] in all things, from respect, to needs, to the ***order*** in which a person must set priorities. The rabbi always came first; a person's reverence for a rabbi "must border on his or her reverence for God."[127] It was not surprising, then, that not a few rabbis abused the trust, and, though they were supposed to minister free of charge, they took payment of any sort, including the houses of widows, who were then left in a position of helplessness. Again, the present-day teacher must take careful note and point out that Jesus ***did get angry*** when the success or the harmony of the Kingdom of God was threatened.

Yes, a skeptical student might say, OK. He got angry at those types of things. That's almost logical. But I don't get angry at the upsetting of the celestial scheme of things. I get angry when people hurt me, or try to put me down, when people lie... and the teacher might respond, "Yes, but can't you see

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[126] Ibid, p. 253.

[127] Ibid.

from Luke that that action on your part or another person's part, that breach of reconciliation, is what made Jesus mad, too?

Here we must be very careful, because the Gospels really are clear about anger on one level, but not so clear on a personal level. Reading the two passages of Luke earlier quoted, one can easily see Jesus' anger at civil or spiritual corruption, greed, and selfishness. Indeed, the teacher of Jesus must point out the Christian obligation to recognize public evils as a breach of the goal of reconciliation, and ***must*** show what Fosdick calls "righteous indignation." To be silent is to allow evil to rule, and Jesus was clearly against that.

Jesus also showed anger when one person harmed another or did not / would not help him or her because of his/her color, religion, sex, or any other God-given trait. In this, Jesus shows what Fosdick describes as "unselfish" anger. Fosdick notes that "...the Master never spoke two words of anger when they brutally mistreated him; ***his*** indignation was aroused only over the abuse of ***others***."[128] That is a wonderful portrait of a perfect human being, with the capacity to feel unselfishly indignation at how others are wronged, and be silent when one's self is wronged.

But is that Jesus' message? Might it not be pointed out that Jesus did have anger when he was wronged, but was able to process that anger, dissect it, understand it, give it to God, ***and then*** be able to come out of his own pain in order to understand the motivation on the part of the offender, and thus be able to work on his own behalf as well as on the behalf of his "enemy" toward reconciliation? When one considers the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, found in Luke 15: 11-32, it is clear that the adjective "prodigal"should

[128] Ibid, p. 35

not be applied to the once- lost but now - found son, but to the ***father***, who loved his son ***prodigiously***, enough to replace his sure - to- have - existed anger with love for one who had had trouble finding his way in life. The lesson of Jesus, it seems, from Luke, is that in spite of anger, we must be able to love "prodigiously" and be able to replace selfish anger with anger fraught with possibilities for healing, and thus, reconciliation. It is not the anger which we are to suppose is not part of this Christian ethos, it is the inability to transcend that anger, to put it to work and use it to show God's magnificent love which is the error. At this juncture, I would take issue with Fosdick, who said Jesus is never angry at a wrong done to him as an individual; I believe he was able to translate and utilize personal anger for a higher good. What, one would ask, was the "better good" wrought from the actions of the father who loved prodigiously? A reconciled relationship with his son: the goal of the Kingdom of God on earth.

It must be obvious, reading the Gospel of Luke, that Jesus was not a sexist, and indeed, in spite of cultural prohibitions, paid women the greatest respect. Here was "Christ against culture" in a classic sense. Luke draws the picture vividly, full of the unspoken consequences for Jesus, when he says in Chapter 7, verse 37, that Jesus spoke with a ***woman*** who was a ***sinner***. She was double jeopardy: female and a ***known*** sinner - as religious culture would define it. But Jesus allows her to weep, to touch him (that was strictly for -- bidden), to anoint him, and in so doing, stirred more people to rise against him. He used the woman to show that all people belong to God's kingdom, and the lesson was all the more important because he ***chose*** a woman to make that point. Women in those days, were of less value than some animals, but Jesus

had to illustrate that in God's kingdom, all people belong.

The Gospels all show how Jesus was tried, in his attempt to be God - like, but the story recorded in Luke of Jesus' temptation is one of the most vivid accounts of this particular struggle - and it points out not only Jesus' nature but the difficulty he may have had in making his character stick in an unkind world. The popular perception of Jesus is that it was easy for him to merely ***be***. After all, he was God's son, devoid of sin. But he was ***human***, and as such was subject to the temptations which threaten any human being. His dialogue with Satan in the fourth chapter of Luke injects his struggle with realism and vitality; Luke, the master story - teller lets us know that Jesus was not merely tempted, but ***sorely*** tempted, in ways which few of us would have been able to resist. It was through his immersion in the world, gaining strength to withstand it, that he gained his power and spiritual strength, not by leading a monk's existence, or taking the position of some present - day denominations, and closing himself off. Fosdick writes:

> Consider how impossible real nobility of character would be if our goodness were untried innocence instead of victorious virtue. Struggle, built into the fiber of manhood, temptation used as an opportunity for conquest and growth - this is the ideal which the Master presents.[129]

All of these real qualities of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels (here Luke) run directly counter to the popular perceptions we have uncovered. There was nothing easily begotten in Jesus' character, divinity notwithstanding, because it was his humanity which bore the struggle on earth. The gospels point out his ability to love, forgive, endure - and they perhaps reveal more of his divine nature than his human nature. But the teacher must always keep in mind the

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[129] Ibid, p. 89

fact that Jesus was only at the expense of great personal struggle, and it is that struggle, with the emergent victory, that the teacher must convey. In so doing, the message of Jesus escapes trivialization and begins to take on meaning and relevance for those who "would see Jesus."

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

I have entered and emerged from this project a different person.

I have always simply ***believed*** in Jesus. I have glossed over those things which have no discernible, temporal explanation, and simply accepted Jesus as my friend, my way to God.

I never took the time to examine his personality, nor did I really bother to think about his struggles in light of who people thought he was.

Negative popular perceptions have existed about Jesus since his sojourn on earth.

But I went into this project unprepared for the dilemmas which many Christians face as they struggle with their faith. I had no idea of how those dilemmas have stopped not a few Christians from full fellowship with God.

As I read the Gospels, and other materials, I felt, however, a new excitement, a new closeness with Jesus, and thus with God. At one point I stopped and asked myself, "Are you an Evangelical?" I never answered the question because I couldn't define the term. But I found myself crying, praying, rejoicing as I went along, filled with joy and thanksgiving that there is a Jesus.

I came into the paper rather amorphous; I leave with a new commitment to teach Jesus, who he was, what his personality was like. I found that I could not, and cannot, refer to him as "Christ." That is not his name; it was and is his office. I find that in Jesus, the Christ, my Christ, there is as much responsibility as there is hope.

His message of reconciliation is a clear one.

And I am more committed than ever to preach it.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire
Popular Perceptions of Jesus

1. Are you a professing Christian?

   Y ____
   N ____

2. Are you:

   Male ____
   Female ____
   White ____
   Black ____

3. Your age:

   12-18 ____
   18-35 ____
   36-50 ____
   Over 50 ____

4. Your denomination is:

   Protestant (specify) _____
   Roman Catholic _____
   Other _____

5. Do you believe in Jesus?

   Yes ____
   No ____

6. Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah?
   Yes ____
   No ____

7. Do you believe in the <u>divinity</u> of Jesus?

   Yes ____
   No ____
   Not sure ____

8. Do you believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

9. How important is Jesus to you in your spiritual life?

Very _____
Some _____
Little _____

10. Do you believe that Jesus is THE way to the Father? (i.e., that Jesus is the mediator or intercessor between humans and God?)

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

11. Can a Christian be a Christian without believing in Jesus as Messiah?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

12. Do you have a favorable impression of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____

13. Do you believe Jesus had a code of ethics?

Yes _____
No _____

14. Do you believe Christians follow that code?

Yes _____
No _____

15. Do you receive a positive or empowering message of Jesus from your pastor?

Yes _____
No _____

16. Does the message of Jesus empower you as a: (answer yes or no)

Women _____
Man _____
Youth _____
African-American _____
Other minority _____

17. In your opinion, has the message of Jesus historically been one of empowerment?

Yes _____
No _____

18. Should Jesus receive more or less attention in the Christian church?

More _____
Less _____

19. Do you believe that one must believe in Jesus in order to benefit from the gift of salvation?

Yes _____
No _____

20. If your church has a class teaching Jesus' message, would you attend?

Yes _____
No _____

Submitted by:
Susan K. Smith
Proctor-Booth Fellow
October, 1991

Questionnaire
Popular Perceptions of Jesus

1. Are you a professing Christian?

   Y ____
   N ____

2. Are you:

   Male _____
   Female _____
   Black _____
   White _____
   Asian _____
   Other _____

3. Your age:

   12-18 _____
   18-35 _____
   36-50 _____
   Over 50 _____

4. Your denomination is:

   Protestant (specify) _____
   Roman Catholic _____
   Other _____

5. Do you believe in Jesus?

   Yes _____
   No _____

6. Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God?
   Yes _____
   No _____
   Not sure _____

7. Do you believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____

8. Do you believe in the divinity of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

9. Do you believe that it is necessary to believe in Jesus in order to have eternal life?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

10. Does that mean that you believe that Jesus in the ONLY way to the Father? That is, do you believe that Jesus is the sole mediator between God and human beings?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

11. Do you believe that Jesus was sinless?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

12. Do you believe in the preexistence of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

13. Do you believe in the bodily death and resurrection of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

14. Do you believe one can be a Christian and not believe in both the humanness and divinity of Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

15. How important to you is Jesus in your spiritual life?

Very _____
Some _____
Little _____

16. What is your overall impression of Jesus?

Favorable _____
Negative _____
Other (state) _____

17. In your opinion, should a person who has accepted Jesus in his or her life show signs of changed behavior?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

18. Should the historical person of Jesus receive more or less attention in the Christian church?

More _____
Less _____

19. In your church, do you hear sermons relating to Jesus?

Very often _____
Fairly often _____
Sometimes _____
Seldom _____
Never _____

20. Did Jesus have a code of ethics?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

21. Do Christians follow that code?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

22. Can a person be a Christian and be (answer yes or no)?

Racist _____
Sexist _____

23. Are the messages of love and forgiveness that Jesus taught lessons you try to live by?

Yes _____
No _____

24. Is it necessary for a Christian to try to live as Jesus lived?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

25. Do you believe that Jesus performed miracles while he was alive?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

26. Do you believe that he still performs miracles?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

27. Do you believe that organized religion has helped or hurt the message and intent of Jesus?

Helped _____
Hurt _____

28. Do you believe that Jesus ever had a male-female relationship?

Yes _____
No _____

29. If he had such a relationship, in your opinion would that take away from his divinity?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

30. Was Jesus:

White _____
Black _____
Asian _____
Other _____

31. If Jesus were found to be a race other than Caucasian, would that offend you or affect your ability to worship God through him?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

32. In your opinion are God and Jesus one and the same?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

33. Has the message of Jesus, as preached to you, been one of empowerment?

Yes _____
No _____

34. Is the message of Jesus, as you understand it from the Bible, one of empowerment?

Yes _____
No _____
Not sure _____

35 Do you want to know more about Jesus?

Yes _____
No _____

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